





WORLD EXCLUSIVE REVEAL

# EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

THE CREATOR OF  
MASTER CHIEF  
REDEFINES  
THE SCI-FI  
SHOOTER

# DISINTEGRATION

**#336**  
OCTOBER 2019







# Make someone happy, make someone smile

Videogames, with very few exceptions, are collaborative works – and are ultimately a reflection of the people that make them. Yet increasingly they're also about a collision of industries, where different professions combine to push interactive entertainment in unexplored directions. This month we visit Rebellion, one of the longest-running game developers in the UK, to discuss its latest endeavour: a move into TV and film production, including the acquisition of a \$100m movie studio.

Games and films have been bedfellows for some time, but rarely has the connection felt so close. This issue we check in on *John Wick Hex*, which redefines our expectations of the licensed movie tie-in. Mike Bithell and crew weren't just given a script and some concept art; they were brought into the shoot, the editing room and the stunt department to gain a proper understanding of what makes Wick tick. And in further evidence of the growing relationship between games and films – and the headaches that result from it – we also bring you word of WIST, a new scriptwriting tool made by a group of game developers for use in interactive fiction.

It's not all about film and TV, however. In Knowledge, for instance, we report on an unlikely collaboration between the streaming platform Twitch and language-learning app maker Duolingo. And in Studio Profile we learn about how The Chinese Room turned, almost accidentally, from a university research group into a globally respected videogame developer.

It comes in many flavours, but our opening point stands: games are defined by the people that make them. It's ably proven by this month's cover game. Despite the triple-A talent on *Disintegration's* development team – and in particular Marcus Lehto, co-creator of *Halo* and the man who designed Master Chief – the game is equally defined by the younger members of the team, many of whom Lehto hired right out of university. The result is a game that calls back to the classics, then drags them in a thrilling new direction. The story begins on p56.





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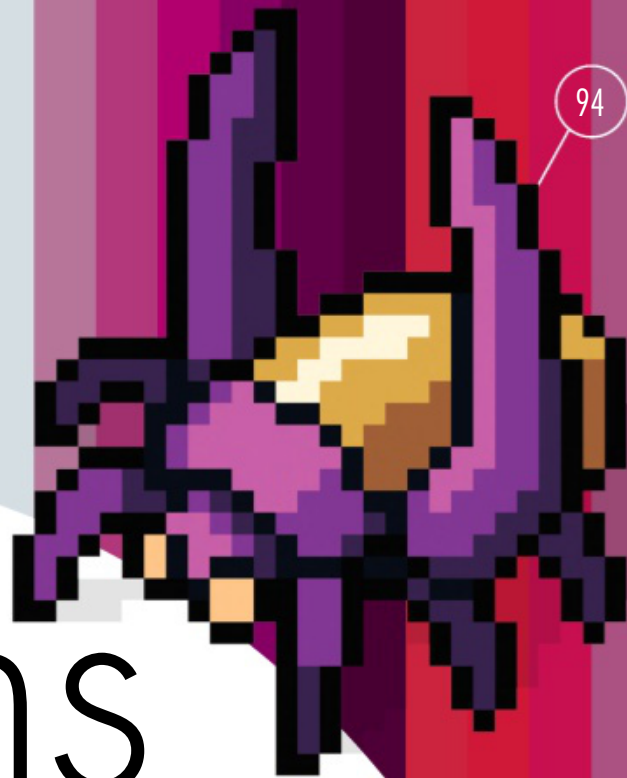


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EDGE



# EDGE

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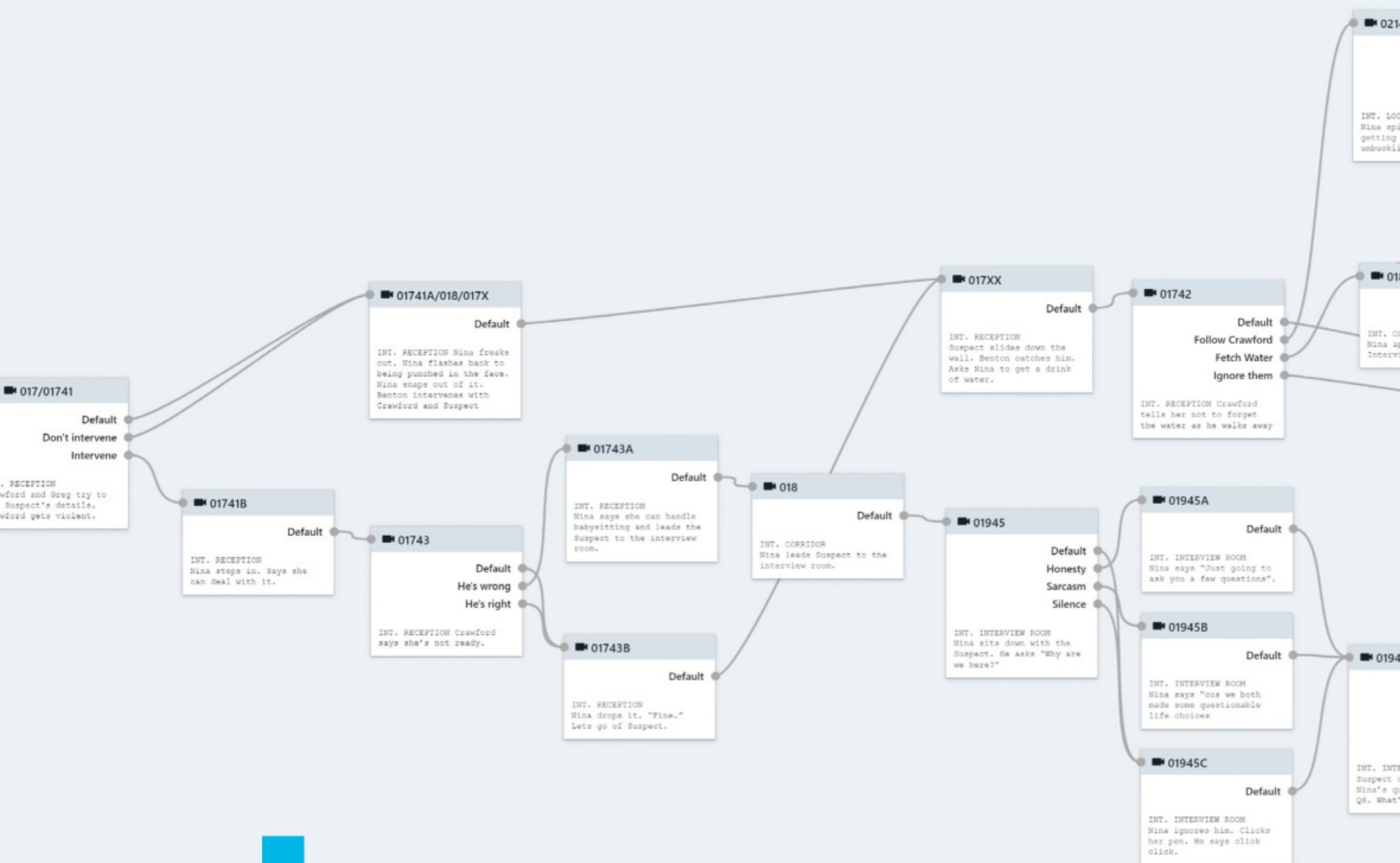
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# Multiverse theory

As [interactive fiction](#) grows ever more mainstream, Wales Interactive posits one potential future via its new software

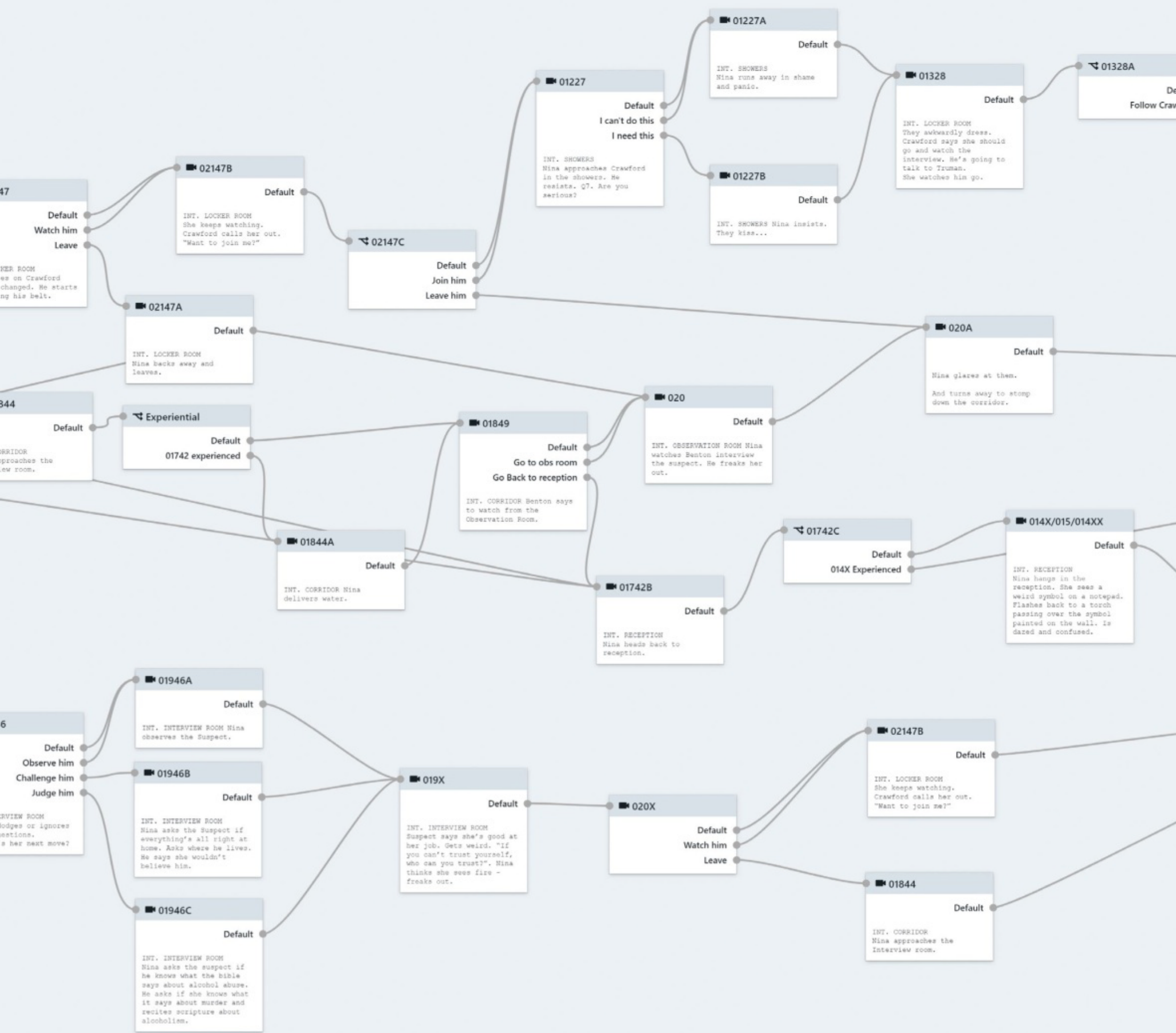
The Bandersnatch effect is in full flow. Like it or not – and many less well-known, far more experienced interactive fiction writers than Charlie Brooker are, understandably, a bit miffed – the choice-based Black Mirror film has put a niche genre in front of millions of eyeballs with startling results. Suddenly, the world is sitting up and paying close attention to the role interactivity can play in previously

traditional forms of media, and all the major players are after a piece of the pie, from Netflix to the BBC.

All credit to Wales Interactive, then, which has spotted a chance to offer its considerable expertise in the genre to help guide a whole other industry through the wilds of gamified stories. WIST is its brand-new, internally developed interactive fiction tool: it's being used to

simultaneously write and develop several of Wales Interactive's latest titles, but the BAFTA Cymru award-winning studio is also hoping to help facilitate the merging and growth of multiple artistic media.

Studio founders **David Banner** and **Richard Pring** have had plenty of their own experience trying to do so. After a drunken Gamescom conversation with Splendy Games, they decided to help



produce and publish the studio's first FMV game, interactive horror film *The Bunker*. "It was a massive learning curve," Banner tells us, "the way these things are filmed, and working with writers that were not from the game industry." Despite the unique challenges things such as continuity errors posed, the project opened their eyes to the many benefits of working with film and filmmakers: the

marketing clout behind recognisable actors, the money saved on not rendering graphics or optimising, and wide appeal. "People who didn't class themselves as gamers would play it," Banner says. What's more, people who didn't class themselves as game *writers* were starting to become interested in working on their projects – such as forthcoming interactive sci-fi thriller film *The Complex*, scripted by

Lynn Renee Maxcy, one of the writers on the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It soon became clear that the toolset they were using wasn't communicating how a choice-based game works to traditional media writers. "Film writers are used to throwing away loads of bits, and making the story they want to tell," Banner says. "But writers don't want to be programmers." ►





From left: David Banner and Richard Pring, co-founders of Wales Interactive

Banner and Pring were shown open-source interactive fiction tool Twine (with which *Bandersnatch* was developed), but it was deemed too intimidating for traditional writers to learn an alien-looking program, as well as insufficient for what Wales Interactive was trying to achieve on the gameplay side of things.

It seemed the studio would have to build its own tool from scratch – one that could present as simply as possible to people used to writing linear scripts, but which had enough flexibility to allow for more sophisticated game mechanics underneath. At first glance, WIST might have the familiar flowchart-esque look of Twine, but Pring clicks a single button and the layout changes into a standard screenplay view – complete with Courier font and formatting. (“We had to go back and forth between the writers,” Pring says, “because we didn’t even realise we needed to use the right fonts. They were very particular!”) The ability to toggle between the two, we’re told, means writers can be more involved in the process of deciding where certain choices crop up and which scenes they branch off to, instead of handing over a full script to a dev team and having them arrange the pieces. “They can play as they build the script,” Banner says, “so what we end up with is an interactive script which the writer has created – not us.”

A more complex back end on the technological side as compared to software such as Twine, meanwhile, means that developers can jump into a script and easily start tinkering around with the nitty-gritty stuff, and allows some much more mechanically complex features than you’d usually expect from an interactive-fiction writing tool. WIST is specifically designed to unite the two halves of the process in one universally appealing and capable program – a significant refinement of the process of putting together *Bandersnatch* (detailed in E329), which required challenging back-and-forth attempts at coordinating the accessible Twine with Netflix’s own highly technical Branch Manager engine, as well as the creatives using each of them.

WIST, meanwhile, is flexible enough in its presentation that writers are able to

engage with the basics of the mechanical parts of their interactive narratives: variables, for instance, calculated throughout the course of a playthrough according to player actions, and which can trigger new scenes and narrative paths. A writer can have a choice add or subtract points from certain characters’ totals. “So without them knowing, they’re programming,” explains Banner, bringing up a simple menu on the left. “In this one, we’ve got ‘fortitude’, ‘intuition’, ‘temperance’, and they have scores as they go along – so it’s not just binary decisions.” If an NPC or player character’s fortitude falls exceeds a defined limit, then, you can expect consequences during a ‘check’ somewhere down the line – a concept that even non-game writers can logically understand. “Say there’s a choice: ‘Do you run or hide?’” Pring says. “If your fortitude’s too high, you can’t hide because you’re too brave. The choice just doesn’t appear. So we’re not allowing the player to become a totally different character – if you’ve been nice all the way through, then you want to be a bastard, you can’t.”

Twine also has variables, of course, but using them does require some basic knowledge of programming languages. “And it doesn’t plug into our tech,” Banner says. Pring clicks over to the other side of the screen and shows how in WIST, written scenes are linked to video clips through their naming system. “You can do rapid prototyping, so when [developers] deliver the video, that will be the name of the video and this automatically plugs directly into our tech.” WIST allows the script to drive the film, then, rather than coming in at the end of the process. “This is like Twine on steroids,” Banner smiles.

“Nothing else existed, really,” Pring says. “We had a look around, because we’re not one to make something unless we really need to. It’s simple stuff, like audio actions. If we have an FMV film, audio can play over two clips. But how do you set it? We’ve had to incorporate

that into this, where if a track’s playing, it carries over to the next clip.”

It all contributes to a tool that makes it easier for Banner and Pring to direct. “We can already play our writer’s script, have opinions and make decisions,” Banner says, “and they can work within this, update it wherever – we can even print it out as a traditional script.” The idea is that game directors and producers can reference and play the script in WIST while shooting on set. “But the main thing is we can play it before we spend any money making the thing.”

**“We can play our writer’s script, have opinions and make decisions, and they can work within this”**

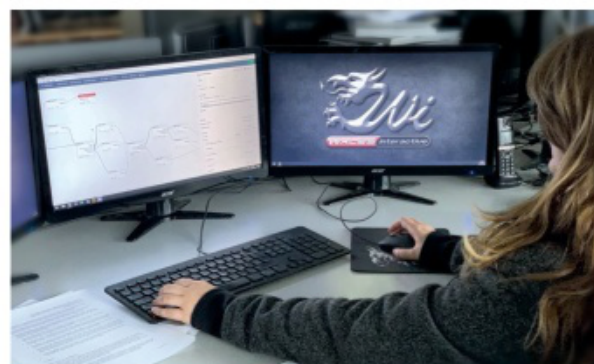
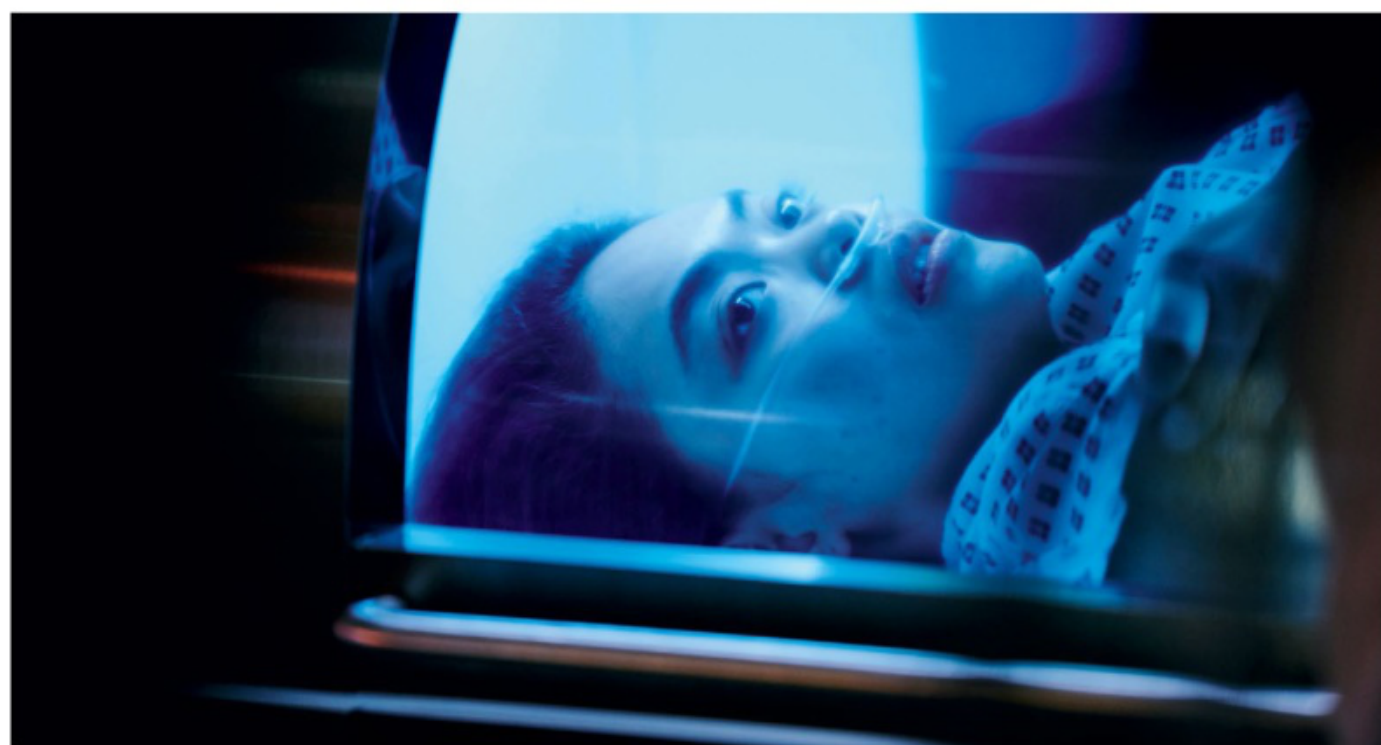
**It’s undoubtedly a** tantalising business prospect for many would-be interactive fiction makers, then. Banner and Pring have already taken meetings with streaming giants Netflix and Amazon to show how WIST can augment a creative

process in flux. “We realised making these films with different types of creatives could be made better,” Banner says. “It’s not a new genre, but it’s being reinvented. And the tools don’t work the way we need them to.”

WIST’s uses as a narrative tool go beyond interactive films: the studio is already using it to shape the branching story for its forthcoming firstperson survival-horror game *Maid Of Sker*. Its ability to translate game scripts – even if in a largely superficial manner – into something that non-game writers can parse could be one of the first steps to bridging the gap between two different creative industries, opening up the talent pool and hopefully giving rise to new concepts for interactive media. No doubt we’ll see plenty more studios announce they’re working on their own tools in a race to make the ‘one size fits all’ software and capitalise on the renewed mainstream interest in interactive narrative. Ultimately, however, Wales Interactive hopes WIST will help enrich videogames as a medium, both in terms of creators and players. “Our audience is growing, and that’s the important thing,” Banner says. Hear, hear. ■



Stealth horror game *Maid Of Sker* is one of the studio's few non-FMV games in production, but is still using WIST to structure its narrative



WIST will be released for hobbyists "eventually," Pring says. "It's a strong beta at the moment. We'll see what the appetite is." For business, it's already proving useful, helping the studio accurately estimate shooting costs before approving projects



## TWO FOR ONE

Looking towards a truly multiplatform, multimedia future



Over the last few years of making games, Banner says, the studio has realised that "a byproduct of what we make is a linear cut film – which we can sell. That business model's never been done before". They're calling it the 'Director's Cut' version of the game – not the studio's, but the players'. It's a further merging of two industries. "We can see what was the most popular ending or satisfying journey just down to metrics. The best version for us is the interactive one, but equally maybe people who don't want to engage with that can enjoy *The Complex* as a film. We've won BAFTAs, but it's weird that we could maybe win an Oscar – two guys who made a little company in Wales to make games!"



# Watch and learn

How Duolingo's partnership with Twitch will help game fans **improve their language skills**

As the provider of one of the most popular ways to learn a new language – its app has around 300 million users worldwide – Duolingo has been thinking about gamification for some years now. “One of the reasons why we’ve been successful is because we focus so much time and attention on making learning fun,” the company’s **Sam Dalsimer** explains. “We’ve learned over the years that the hardest thing about trying to learn a language is simply staying motivated and keeping at it: a lot of people start, realise it’s difficult and then they give up. So we focus on making sure that you want to keep coming back.”

We’ve heard variants on that last sentence quite a bit lately. As more blockbuster games evolve into services, the subject of user retention keeps cropping up. And so it’s no surprise to learn that as the app continues to grow, game design is at the heart of Duolingo’s efforts: earlier this year, it introduced leaderboards, which have proven a popular incentive to stick at it. Given the company’s affinity for games, its latest enterprise makes perfect sense. With the popularity of streaming showing no sign of abating, the company has launched a venture in partnership with Twitch: the Duolingo Verified Streamer Program has endorsed a number of multilingual streamers, with a core of game players alongside travellers, cooks and artists, all in an effort to encourage their audiences to take up a new language or two.

Naturally, a lot of research went into finding the right blend. The initial group has been extensively vetted, and includes

a healthy mix of languages. Duolingo specifically sought out channels advertising that they were multilingual, those actively welcoming audiences that speak different languages, and some who were seeking a little help in return: English isn’t the first language for many of the selected streamers, after all. These affiliates hail from all over the globe, from Arkansas to Tunisia. They speak a variety of languages, from Catalan to Chinese, Italian to Arabic. And their gaming backgrounds are equally varied: one is a *League Of Legends* caster, another a *Zelda* speedrunner, and there’s even a professional *CS:GO* player.

Diversity was key, but beyond that, the criteria for selection was relatively simple. “We basically looked for streamers that were really engaged with their audience and passionate about what they’re doing,” Duolingo’s **Sara Green** says. Meanwhile, the benefit for the streamers – beyond the positive vibes of giving back to others – is obvious.

Duolingo already has a massive in-built audience, and its own Twitch channel will host these streams, potentially attracting a new wave of viewers to those channels. Twitch is, after all, a numbers game, and the difference could be huge for those involved.

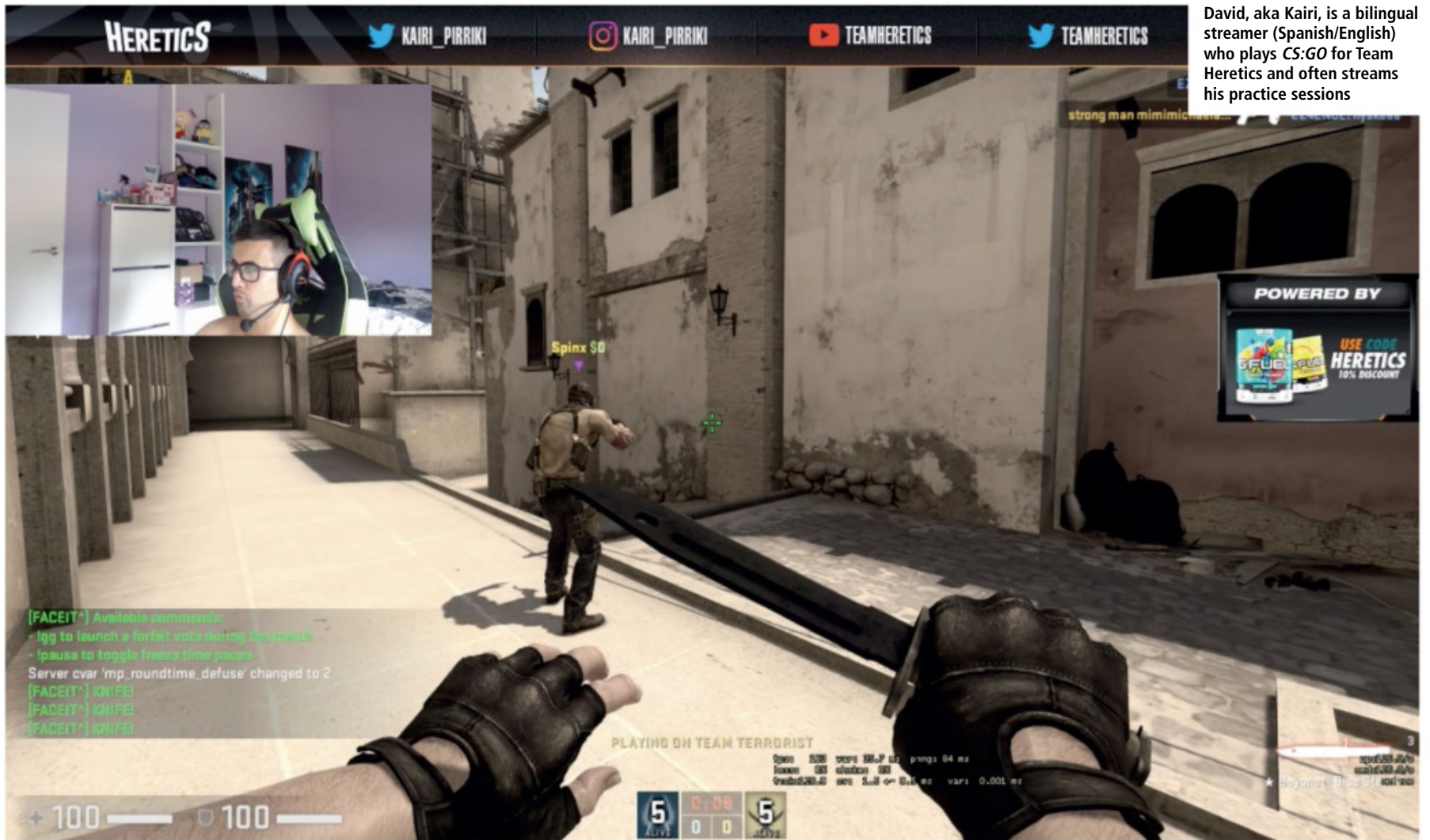
While the company will keep tabs on its streamers (as long as they abide by Twitch’s guidelines, Dalsimer says, Duolingo will consider their broadcasts safe for its own users) it will otherwise adopt a relatively hands-off approach. The last thing it wants to do, Green explains, is to detract from whatever brought viewers to these channels in the



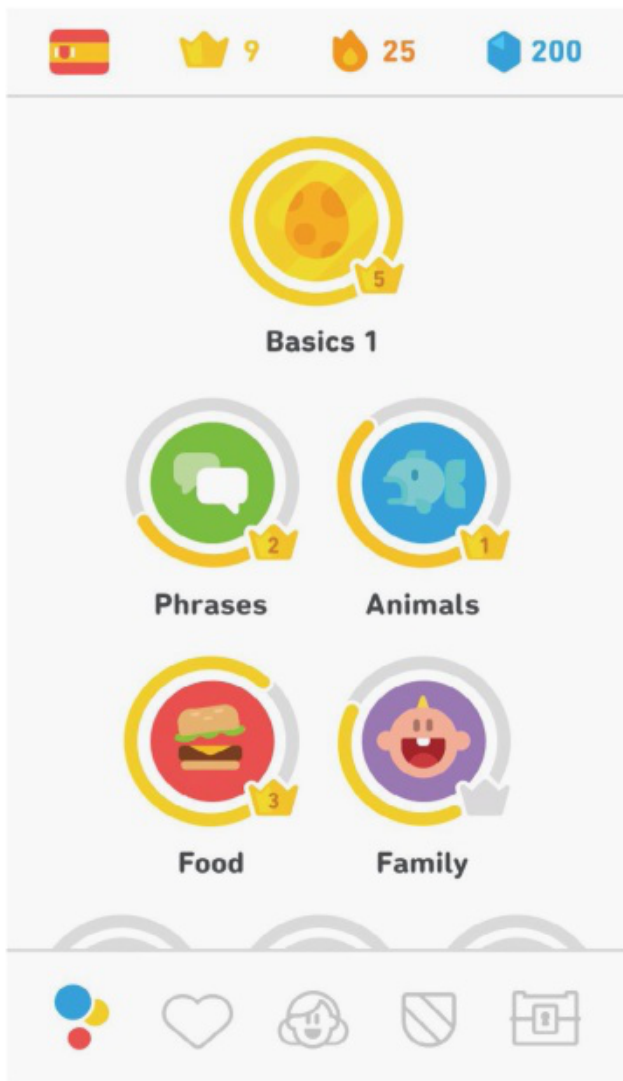
first place. “We really didn’t want to have streamers shape the channel around this programme, because their viewers are drawn to their personality and the content they produce already. So we’re happy to let them stream whatever games they want to play.”

**Instead, the goal** of the programme is to sustain a community that is open to learning languages; to provide a space where people feel comfortable trying out what they’ve picked up in chat, with the chance to have their favourite streamers respond. “We’re not thinking about it as the streamer teaching their audience necessarily,” Dalsimer says. “We want them to get exposure to language as it’s naturally spoken. We want people hearing native speakers, using phrases and terminology around their hobby that they might normally use, and getting exposure to authentic native accents, which is very useful for training the ear.”

The advantage of Twitch, then, is that it involves both passive and interactive elements: viewers will get to both listen to a language and potentially get feedback on their own efforts. And, of course, Duolingo is right there for those who then want to take the next step. It’s a gentle nudge rather than a shove, in other words, but Dalsimer hopes that this will encourage a new generation of language enthusiasts who’ve been inspired by games and those who play them. “As an anecdotal example, my wife came to the United States when she was six, and she learned English from watching *Friends* on TV,” he says. “I want to see a future where a few years from now we hear people say they learned English, or Spanish, or whatever it may be, from watching streamers and from playing videogames.” ■



David, aka Kairi, is a bilingual streamer (Spanish/English) who plays CS:GO for Team Heretics and often streams his practice sessions



The influence of videogames on Duolingo's app is obvious, from its playfully competitive elements (such as the leaderboards, which are refreshed each Monday) down to the menu design



"At Duolingo, there's a real culture of innovation," Dalsimer says. "We always like to try new things, and this [initiative] is one of them." This, he suggests, is only the start; once the programme is underway, Duolingo will be seeking out other streamers to expand the range of languages on offer, and is planning to run educational streams via its official Twitch channel. "The idea is that people can watch the streamers and then our streams, which will add to their ability to learn through Twitch," Green says. "We definitely see this as a platform that can be helpful in terms of language-learning for our viewers."





# Travel Lite

*Smaller, lighter, longer-lasting* – can Switch's new model deliver joy without Joy-Cons?

Nintendo has never held much truck with convention, but it's still surprising to witness a hardware announcement accompanied by a trailer illustrating what it *can't* do. So it was with the debut of the Switch Lite, a more compact, lightweight revision dedicated to handheld play – and which, as demonstrated by Yoshiaki Koizumi, fits within the inside pocket of a suit jacket. It will come in at \$100 cheaper than its older sibling, thanks to a host of cost-cutting changes. There's no dock or HDMI cable, since Switch Lite won't

connect to your TV. Controls are integrated, so no more Joy-Cons – which in turn means no IR Camera. You can say goodbye to HD Rumble, too, while the absence of a kickstand rules out tabletop mode. Here, in other words, is a Switch that no longer lives up to its name.

Put that way, it sounds like a terrible idea. Yet it's an acknowledgement of how a large proportion of Switch players actually use it. Until now Nintendo has positioned Switch as a home console you can take on the move rather than a handheld you can connect to your TV. But

as anyone who's filled out a Nintendo survey recently will attest, the company has been keeping track of who plays it docked and undocked. The numbers will have suggested this is the right move, even before you consider the vast audience who might balk at paying £280 for a new console, or those now ready to upgrade: Nintendo might claim that Switch Lite isn't designed to replace the 3DS line, but it's not fooling anyone.

A hardware revision removing key features is hardly without precedent. Many people didn't invest in 3DS until





autostereoscopy was no longer part of the deal, and having a Switch that doesn't, well, *switch* is arguably no stranger than a console called 2DS that plays 3DS games. This isn't quite the same, since 3D slider and hinge aside, the two devices were functionally identical. Here, to play any games that don't support handheld mode – such as *1-2 Switch* and *Super Mario Party* – you'll need to buy a pair of Joy-Cons, which brings the price much closer to the original Switch.

Among the console's rapidly growing library, the list of games that don't support

handheld play is vanishingly small. Even so, it's hard not to feel that creative experiments – cardboard creativity booster Labo being the obvious example, or even *Mario Party*'s more unusual asides – are now less likely to be released given the probable success of the cheaper model. The lack of nuanced force feedback will also make certain Moons in *Super Mario Odyssey* tricky to excavate (a patch for one of Switch's flagship games is surely incoming) while Seaside Kingdom's fizzy ocean will be missed on Lite.

Still, for all that Switch Lite is defined more by the features it's missing, there are benefits beyond the more wallet-friendly price. The addition of a traditional D-pad will be a godsend for *Tetris 99* fans and anyone who never quite got used to controlling 2D platformers with an analogue stick. Improved battery life, slight as it may be, is a bonus. Meanwhile, a wave of new players will get to discover the likes of *Breath Of The Wild* for the first time – and we guarantee none of them will be thinking about downgrades when that happens. ■

# Frame perfect

Dan Trachtenberg explains why his latest videogame project is a dream come true

**W**e've seen plenty of stars from film and TV winging it when they accept a paycheck to work in videogames. Even the best actors can struggle to convince us that their excitement about a project is genuine (in some cases, they don't bother trying).

**Dan Trachtenberg**, director of *10 Cloverfield Lane*, *Black Mirror* episode *Playtest* and the pilot for Amazon anti-superhero series *The Boys*, does not have to pretend. For a man whose career has been informed by videogames even before *No Escape* – his dazzling short film based on Valve's *Portal* – first brought him to Hollywood's attention, his latest project was something of a dream gig. In fact, Trachtenberg's new six-minute cinematic intro to Digital Extremes' F2P shooter *Warframe*, unveiled at the studio's Tannocon event in July, came about after he approached the developer rather than the other way around.

It all began when he was making *10 Cloverfield Lane*. Shooting in New Orleans, Trachtenberg was looking for a way to connect with his friends back home in LA. *Destiny* had just released, he recalls, but it wasn't quite doing the job. "I was complaining about games like *Destiny* and *Overwatch*, where the carrot on the stick is aesthetics, right?" he begins. "It's about how cool this gun looks, or how cool this new armour looks. And yet I don't really get to see it, because it's a firstperson game! It's always frustrated me." His friend, artist Brad Arnold (with whom he would later nerd out as the pair storyboarded the cinematic together) suggested he play

*Warframe* instead: "He said, 'It's thirdperson, and it's got this great traversal mechanic', and hey, I'm a sucker for a good traversal mechanic." He started playing on PS4 and was soon hooked; by the time Trachtenberg bought a gaming PC, it had become a full-blown obsession. He tweeted his love for the game, which caught the attention of its makers: "I slid into their DMs, and said, 'I'd do anything to work with you guys'."

The two parties were on the same page from minute one. Trachtenberg had been gushing about *Warframe* to his friends, but was mindful – as, indeed, was Digital Extremes – that the game lacked an immediate narrative hook.

Rather than a live-action commercial, the idea for an opening cinematic was floated. Trachtenberg called his colleague Sheridan Thomas at production company Great Guns, before the two found the ideal collaborator in Digic Pictures, a CG animation company based in Budapest.

The whole thing may have taken 18 months to put together – the final sound edit arrived just 24 hours before Tannocon, he tells us – but the process was otherwise relatively smooth. Moving from film to games would, you might think, require a period of adjustment, but since the intro was to be a self-contained narrative – and since Trachtenberg was already more than familiar with the game – there was little disparity between his vision and Digital Extremes'. "A lot of live-action trailers show you things you can't actually do in the game. The great thing about *Warframe* is you can do so many of



Dan Trachtenberg,  
film director

those cool things. I mean, I cheat here and there, but only very lightly." He describes it almost as a highlights package; a heavily authored version of the kind of multiplayer experiences he's had while playing *Warframe*. "The last sequence where the *Warframes* are using their abilities... sure, it doesn't always happen that tightly. But certainly over the years I have had moments like that."

**Rather than dispelling** any preconceptions he might have had about working in games, the project seems to have invigorated his desire to work within the medium again. "I'm friends with Neil Druckmann, and during discussions with him, and with Geoff and Steve [Sinclair, *Warframe*'s director], I've become very jealous of the creative control that you get in games, and the iterative process that you just don't get in movies. Those guys are able to design all elements and set the standard of collaboration with everyone; that isn't always my choice or my position in movies."

That said, he's got a blockbuster film on his slate; he'll direct Tom Holland as Nathan Drake in Sony's adaptation of *Uncharted*, due for release next year. Has this helped him understand what fans of a big franchise are looking for? "It was certainly heartening to go from assuming that I know this game well and then being mocked on stage," he laughs. "It was a lesson that there's always people who know this thing more than you do. And yet then displaying this thing I'd made and having that be appreciated, like, 'Oh, this guy *does* understand what we like about it'? That was a nice little roller-coaster ride to be on – and one that I think probably foreshadows anything else I do when it comes to adapting videogames for movies and TV." ■

**PLAY, CREATE, SCARE**  
Games have been at the heart of Trachtenberg's work since his five-year stint on video podcast *The Totally Rad Show*. While working with Charlie Brooker on *Black Mirror* episode, *Playtest*, meanwhile, he admits that – much to the chagrin of producer Annabel Jones – the two would spend hours in meetings discussing their favourites (Brooker even bought Trachtenberg a copy of Bethesda's 2016 *Doom* reboot). But the influence of videogames goes far beyond *Playtest*'s frequent references, he says. "Even with *10 Cloverfield Lane*, I drew from these taut, tense, thirdperson narrative experiences like *The Last Of Us* or *Uncharted* in designing the story and the dramatic beats – as much as I drew from movies like *Misery* or *Dead Calm*."





The *Warframe* cinematic went into production as Trachtenberg began shooting the pilot episode of *The Boys* in Toronto. This meant working remotely, with producer Sheridan Thomas heading to Digic in Budapest



# MOONAGE DAYDREAM

The Game Bakers' space-set RPG uses seductive colour palettes and rhythm-based fights to weave a tale of romance on a dangerous alien planet

Love is a team sport – but you don't see many videogames in which romantic partners use their bond to take down enemies. *Haven* is the story of a couple that elopes to a deserted planet. Visually, it's inspired by the bright colours and graphic shapes of *Persona*, *Gravity Rush* and Studio Ghibli, a marriage of eastern and western aesthetics. Tall grass sways as the characters glide over it. "While exploring, they have a lot of interactions in their moveset – holding hands, hugging, kissing,"

creative director **Emeric Thoa** says. "And in combat, they team up like beach volleyball players, which helps you feel their bond."

The fights might look turn-based, but are actually realtime: you load orders by holding buttons, then release them to trigger actions in sync with each character. It's a little like a rhythm game, and has "a very sensual feeling," Thoa says. You can feel the connection for yourself when *Haven* comes to PC and consoles next year. ■



The fantasy tech in *Haven* is not strictly sci-fi, Thoa tells us. "It's a bit retro-futurist, influenced by *Cowboy Bebop*, *Laputa* and *Dragon Ball*"





# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



**"The audience is absolutely ruthless,** and we should never suspect for a second that they're not. They don't care how many people died making the product. At the end of the day, it's about the quality of what's on screen."

*Oddworld* creator **Lorne Lanning** weighs in on the crunch debate. For the record, seven people died in the production of this issue of **Edge**



**"I am now selling my bath water!** This is what humanity has come to."

Self-styled 'gamer girl' **Belle Delphine** proves the old adage about fools and their money endures



**"It's like having a movie in a cinema and half the people walk out. We have a serious problem with people not even finishing our games,** and still people complain about replayability."

**Josef Fares** continues to be the hero videogames need

"The only problem is that, if there is some good-for-nothing idea I come up with over the weekend, **I have no one to share it with the next Monday.**"

**Shigeru Miyamoto** on his much-missed friend and boss at Nintendo, the late Satoru Iwata. Gosh, it's ever so dusty in here today, isn't it?



## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene

**Game** Enter The Gungeon: House Of The Gungeon  
**Manufacturer** Griffin Aerotech

Devolver Digital has always been a bit hit-and-miss, not only in the quality of its output – for every *Hotline Miami*, there's a *Gods Will Be Watching* – but also in its sense of humour, which at its worst reminds us that before Devolver, there was Gamecock. This is, in fairness, a natural consequence of building a company that exists to subvert convention, and expectations – which is presumably why Devolver has commissioned an arcade-exclusive spin-off of bullet-hell dungeon-crawler *Enter The Gungeon*.

As the title suggests, *House Of The Gungeon* is an on-rails lightgun shooter set in the *Gungeon* universe. While the game is being developed by the wonderfully named *Gungeon* developer Dodge Roll, the cabinet is the work of Griffin Aerotech, the small start-up behind indie coin-op *Skycruser*. Those of you with a little grey about the temples may be delighted to note the colour scheme on the pistol peripherals, which call quite clearly back to 1990s lightgun classic *Point Blank*. Quite how well this will sell – Griffin is taking pre-orders now, a snip at \$4,999 – remains to be seen, but in fairness that's probably besides the point. This is Devolver we're talking about, after all.







**TOTAL**  
**FILM**  
**ON SALE 23 AUGUST**

## COMIC

### Watch Dogs #2: Second Chance

[bit.ly/watchdogcomic](http://bit.ly/watchdogcomic)

*Watch Dogs* is a weird old thing, requiring unexpectedly delicate handling. Playing into the hacker fantasy is key, in our opinion: add too much gritty realism and heartbreaking family drama, as Ubisoft did with the first game, and it all becomes a bit too maudlin to be fun. Simon Kansara's comic book adaptation stars 17-year-old Brazilian hacker Sauda, who's on a mission to sniff out and take down the drug lords terrorising her home country. It's a thrilling premise, but its extended scenes of violence and people standing around saying not very much in dim rooms continue into this second part, which isn't the sunny summer read we'd hoped for. Still, if you're after something darker than *Watch Dogs 2*'s San Franciscan japes, this might hit the spot.



## VIDEO

### The Vanished King Of Tekken

[bit.ly/kingoftekken](http://bit.ly/kingoftekken)

This is the feelgood tale of Qudans. One of the world's best *Tekken* players in the mid-2000s, he quit to perform his mandatory two years of South Korean military service. In 2012, his father passed away: devastated, he returned to *Tekken* in search of a distraction. The video charts his slow but steady comeback in the pro scene (and, perhaps unwittingly, his developing sense of style). It's a story that shows the importance of communities such as the FGC and long-running game series, and what they can mean to someone who just needs something that feels like home.

## WEB GAME

### The Things We Lost In The Flood

[bit.ly/inthefloodgame](http://bit.ly/inthefloodgame)

Sending and receiving messages in bottles is a lovely videogame mechanic. *Animal Crossing: Wild World* used it to charming effect; there's even something of it in the way *Soulsborne* players leave each other tips and jokes. *The Things We Lost In The Flood* takes the idea to shiveringly contemplative heights, setting you sailing on an ocean of other people's thoughts. You build your boat – and end the world – while coming across notes from other players, all anonymous: confessions of love, or guilt, or even a recipe for Alfredo sauce (thanks, kind stranger). But perhaps the most cathartic feature is that you can throw your own musings into the sea for someone else to find. After a strange, lost couple of months round here, we find ourselves oddly content with drifting.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## HARDWARE

### PC Engine Mini

[bit.ly/pcenginemini](http://bit.ly/pcenginemini)

Given the sudden rush of retro miniconsoles, this was always on the cards: the Japanese-model PC Engine was the smallest home console ever made for a while. Yet Konami's decision to give it the microconsole treatment is still something of a surprise (not least because it provides further evidence that the Japanese company still has interests beyond *PES* and pachinko). Its announcement rather sank at E3, but the recent reveal of its software line-up put it in the headlines and very much on our wishlist. Fifty games will be included; while not all are classics, and some are localised duplicates, the thought of having *Rondo Of Blood*, *Bonk's Revenge*, *Parasol Stars* and Hideo Kojima's *Snatcher* hooked up to an OLED screen in 2019 has us suitably giddy regardless.



## continue

### Double Mario

*Mario Maker 2* now allows you to upload twice as many levels as before

### Roll the dice

*GTA V Online*'s casino is finally open for business. Please gamble responsibly

### Inception

Media Molecule is officially hiring people to make games in *Dreams*

### Defensive manoeuvres

Streamer PaladinAmber goes viral for roasting creeps with multi-camera setups

## quit

### Locked out

We fear *Overwatch*'s mandatory 2-2-2 role queue negates its USP

### Sticking point

Nintendo faces lawsuit over drifting Joy-Cons. *Edge*'s are still fine, incidentally

### Parting shot

*Splatoon 2* Splaffests end. We'll miss fighting over cake vs ice-cream

### It's a wash

The first trailer for the *Witcher* Netflix series, and there's not a bathtub in sight. Cancel it immediately



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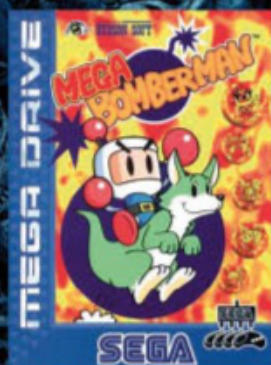
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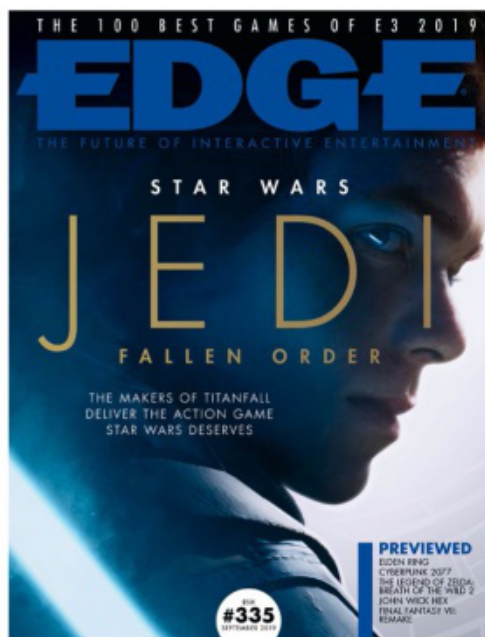
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# DISPATCHES

## OCTOBER



Issue 335

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com). Our letter of the month, if we pick one, wins a year's sub to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation®Plus

### Never in front of friends

The author of the E3 blurb for *Shenmue III* (E335) comments: "We've always been baffled by the furore over Epic Games Store exclusives: the outrage at a game requiring a launcher other than Steam presumably comes from people who keep all their food, crockery and cutlery in one cupboard."

This is an absolutely wretched analogy. Permit me to sentence it to a well-deserved death by over-extension, and perhaps help explain some (by no means all) of the reasons why people might object to being obligated to install the Epic launcher for a game they were earlier promised on Steam.

Firstly, let us imagine that every cupboard you install comes with a door on the opposite side which may permit a burglar access to your house. The door is locked, and the company insists that they've worked out any problems that might have allowed a burglar entry in the past, but there have been some news stories that make you wonder... and you can't help but notice that this new company hasn't been in the cupboard business all that long.

Secondly, the new cupboard has a long list of rules for what you can and cannot do with its contents. You've sadly gotten used to this with your old cupboards, but you cannot help but notice that this is yet one more long list that you are somehow obligated to track for changes that the installer gleefully informs you it can make at any time. You are glumly aware that you will never really read through these lists multiple times, so you sigh and take a deep breath and sign the line as often as you are asked, hoping that you haven't just signed away the contents of your cupboard and/or the deed to your house.

Thirdly, every cupboard eats a small chunk of your house's floor space. They're not too bad individually, but their doors all

open in different directions, and somehow it always seems that they want to occupy as much space as possible, simultaneously, at the worst possible times, demanding that their contents be checked for spoilage or diminishment of style and exchanged for new versions.

Fourth, every cupboard is quietly observing how you use it. This is creepy, but it's another thing to which you have become glumly resigned. But does the new cupboard seem a little more... intrusive, in how it checks on you? Perhaps even like it's borrowing the observations of your other cupboards without asking for permission? It's an uncomfortable reminder of the

helpless extent to which you're hoping these cabinet people both know what they are doing and remain on the up-and-up...

Fifth, the makers of the new cabinet seem uninterested in the fact that their cabinet has fewer shelves, squeakier hinges, and makes it significantly more difficult both to find what you are looking for and collect it to go

on a picnic with your friends. Instead, they appear to be pursuing a course that you'll damn well buy their cabinet and like it because they've made a deal with the local cheese shops, and you can now only buy Gouda and Camembert if you're going to put it into their cabinet.

Sixth, while you've come to accept that you actually need a greenhouse to keep living plants and a closet to hang your coats, your house comes from a long history of being able to put whatever you wanted in it. When you got your original cupboard, it seemed like just an addendum to how you were using your house, even if a growing number of objects have become cupboard-dependent. Now the company is telling you that you must have their cupboard, without really making a good case why. You are obligated to use their cupboard if you want

"You are glumly aware that you will never really read through these lists, so you sigh and sign"





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to store particular, exclusive things, for reasons that have nothing at all to do with your utility or necessity, and everything to do with the company selling them.

As for me, I am well aware that my current small stock of cupboards has its own flaws. But they've made their cases for my accepting them and their flaws, mostly by working hard to make up for them in ease of use, variety of contents, and solid customer relations. I should like a company that wants – nearly insists – on installing a new cupboard to make a similar case, rather than trying to strong-arm its way in.

And I would appreciate those who presume to grouse about my choice in this regard to consider the possibility that my reasons for same have, in fact, received significant consideration, rather than being a peculiar and petty display of pique.

**Benjamin Kuhner**

[Dear god in heaven.](#)

## Now it's plain to see

A letter in the September issue (E335) upset me enough that I stopped reading the magazine and came on to write you a letter.

Simon Brindle, who is criticising the warnings about flashing lights in games, has no idea what he is talking about! I know this for a fact because I was diagnosed with epilepsy and have first-hand experience of how that can affect someone.

Even if someone doesn't have light-induced seizures, flashing lights can still affect people. I don't have seizures any more, but large flashing lights can make it hard for me to breathe and increase tension, almost like a seizure used to. In a game I am doing beta testing of, there was a stage where the whole screen would randomly whiten out to express lightning. That got me trembling and having trouble breathing. When I asked others who were playing it, some of them they said they were affected by it negatively as well. Luckily, the game company has responded

to us and toned down that stage so it doesn't flash so much.

I do feel those flashing light warnings should always be shown. Because of my long history of seizures, I have memory problems. When I came back to playing *Final Fantasy IX* on my PS4, I was thankful that it gave a flashing-light warning as the game loaded. It had been about seven years since I had last played it, so I didn't remember it had a stage where there were flashing lights. I checked it out on YouTube and confirmed it won't give me any problems, which makes me glad I got that reminder.

Finally; it isn't only people with epilepsy that can be affected by flashing lights. People with autism and other problems can have reactions to visual stimulus. From within the autism community, I've heard of children that can get panic attacks triggered if they are around flashing lights. Someone with PTSD could have a meltdown or something else triggered as well.

If you want to stand on a soap box and preach to the world, you need to have full understanding of what you are preaching about.

**Sally Taniguchi**

[And sanity is at last restored, though probably only briefly. Enjoy your PS Plus subscription.](#)

## When you become the enemy

Twenty-five years ago, politicians claimed videogames would normalise violence. Eventually it turned out that gamers hadn't become monsters after all. We were justified in our belief that the content of games would have no social effects. While the expectations of violence were overblown, what about the normalisation of it? Speaking for myself and my friends, when we weren't playing *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom*, we were destroying property and picking fights. Luckily, such antics quickly showed their real-world repercussions and it became obvious that we should stop.

Recently, the otherwise fine Extra Credits (a YouTube channel known for in-depth analysis) aired a video on the normalisation of Nazis (and

terrorists) in videogames. Their target wasn't games that featured such hate groups, but games that randomly assigned you to such groups, or arbitrarily made no difference between political factions. The theory goes: evil-doers were portrayed the same as everybody else, that might normalise the evil they stand for.

This video was heavily disliked and mostly featured comments in the vein of: 'So playing a Nazi makes you a Nazi? You're dumb!'. I understand this knee-jerk reaction. Past attempts of condemning games as social conditioners were belittling and wrong. But I do wish to make some things clear. We cannot deny that bigotry is currently being normalised; it's all over the news. There's no proof this has come from games, but it is worth asking ourselves how much of this stems from the way bigots are featured in them. It is not wise to immediately jump to conclusions because it looks like an older argument.

While conducting violence has an immediate effect on your surroundings, hate-mongering is more abstract. It takes longer to realise you're actually doing it because it takes longer before the results come out. And as the history of fascism in different times and eras has shown, it usually takes years before support for (or apathy towards) them leads to oppression. By then it is already too late.

I'm not saying sloppy implementation of political factions in games will necessarily have dire consequences. I am merely saying it is a theory worth looking into. Ultimately, I am advising people to not immediately get defensive. As touchy as a subject it might be, it requires nuance and a forward-leaning attitude to comprehend.

**Robert August de Meijer**

## Call it love

**Edge** always acts as though the world is falling apart. Yet everything seems fine to me. Then again I do live in Australia.

**John Nakhoul**

[Well, living in a land where nature is intent on killing you must afford a certain perspective. ■](#)



STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Frank Zappa once asked, as the title of a 1986 live album, *Does Humor Belong In Music?* He meant the question as an ironic ventriloquy of his critics, implying an answer in the affirmative. Today, by contrast, a vocal subset of the geekerati is asking “Does politics belong in videogames?”, and shrieking “No!”

It is, to be sure, an odd time. This summer, Ubisoft has said that it doesn’t make “political” games, just “mature” ones, while Obsidian has insisted it doesn’t want to “lecture” its players, and so its forthcoming RPG *The Outer Worlds* is not going to be “politically charged”. This is odd since *The Outer Worlds* is set in a galaxy dominated by corporations, while Ubisoft’s recent output has included a game in which Americans are encouraged to kill other Americans, of the white-supremacist type. Not political?

An innocent reading all this might assume that there was an age in which videogames were just ‘fun’, until someone ruined their escapist pleasures by imposing political ideologies on our purely neutral, er, murder simulators. Of course videogames, like all art, have always been political. And not just the explicitly interventionist ones, such as *Metal Gear Solid V*’s critical representation of Guantánamo Bay, or the indie artgames of developers such as Molleindustria (*UnManned*) and Lucas Pope (*Papers, Please*).

Yes, *Mario Kart* is political, because it reinforces the capitalist trope of monetary inducement (coins) to compete against your worker peers (drivers). Yes, *Missile Command* is political, because like an actual nuclear war it is unwinnable: after the player is overwhelmed by too many missiles the inevitable end-state is the nuclear devastation of her territory. Even *Tetris*, one could easily argue, is political, because it promotes the fantasy that if you simply tidy up objects (typically, of course, a gendered chore), they will cleanly vanish: it erases the consumerist world of clutter, landfill, and plastic in the oceans.



Of course, videogames, like all art, have always been political. And not just the explicitly interventionist ones

More obviously, any action game that celebrates torture and other depredations of a hegemonic military is inherently a vehicle that disseminates the propaganda of what I have called “National-Security Ideology”; and any game that features microtransactions is intervening in the real political economy – that prefix ‘micro-’ is itself an example of Unspeak, since the transactions are not so small when blithely clicked through by a child or a gambling addict.

The current controversy only starts to make sense when you realise that the word ‘politics’ itself is being used in a special

way. Players who complain about their hobby being ruined by the ‘political’ only ever mean the kind of politics that seeks to redress issues of ethnic or gender underrepresentation, or to say anything that challenges the worldview of your basic alt-right dude. Such a person (most likely a man) thinks that his second-hand Ayn Rand-style libertarianism, his adoration of the military, his fear and mistrust of migrants, his fear and mistrust of women, and so on, are not ‘politics’ at all: they are simply normal. What counts as politics for him is only something he does not already agree with.

Hence the disgusted reaction from this demographic to CD Projekt Red’s trailer for *Cyberpunk 2077*, in some frames of which you can espy a glowing advertisement featuring an apparently transgender person. “I just want to have fun without having politics shoved down my throat,” complained one typical anti-fan, a choice of language that in its implicit fantasy of fellatio was, as it is when expressing homophobia, revealing. From other quarters, the same fictional advert was criticised for being tokenistic, but at least the developers did, to their credit, not join in their industry colleagues’ disowning of politics: *Cyberpunk 2077*, they insisted, was an “inherently political” game – and how could it not be? Speculative fiction has been inherently political for its entire history.

Such polemical disagreements recall the wider political phenomenon, in our age, of politicians disparaging politics as such. It is a particular rhetorical move of right-wing parties to respond to criticism by accusing their opponents of ‘playing politics’ with some sensitive issue. What they really mean is that their adversaries are treating a subject as a game, but the effect is to degrade the idea of politics itself as a serious activity. But no social being can somehow live apart from politics. And when we are playing a videogame, we are playing politics too.

Steven Poole’s *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at [www.stevenpoole.net](http://www.stevenpoole.net)



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ALEX HUTCHINSON

## Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

During the PS2-to-PS3 transition, EA commissioned a study about Metacritic and its relationship to profitability. Everyone at the various studios was hopeful that it would prove that quality mattered enough to sales that we could use it to push for more time, or better budgets, or any number of things the dev teams had been asking for. The results were more nuanced. The study found that receiving an average review score above 80 had a massive influence, while getting above 90 generally made little difference to the sales achieved at 80+. The cost of pushing quality to that line, however, was often immense.

The impact of this was that while every publisher would prefer all their games to receive perfect review scores, they realised that a really good game was going to do most of the job for their bottom line. It also meant they became desperate to make sure the games they were making were going to clear this magical '80' as soon as possible. Aware that while developers were experts on their game, they were far too close to give a reasonable assessment of their own work, publishers decided an external opinion was required. And so we found ourselves presenting the game to journalists or ex-devs, who would then sit down to play an alpha build, then blur their eyes, imagine what you could fix, what was still to be added and how the market would receive it. They would then write you a 'review', provide an approximate score and a list of all the big pros and cons.

It's a nice idea, and could occasionally buy you breathing room on a project from terrified management who had sunk X million dollars into your project already, but the reality is much more challenging. Even if you've shipped many games, understanding the relationship between time, the team, the state of the project and its probable end state is ridiculously difficult. If you're used to seeing finished games, it's almost impossible.

So unless your game was an unmitigated trash fire, or basically finished and obviously



Even with all the feedback  
in the world, making games  
is an inherently risky  
creative endeavour

high-quality, the process often collapsed into a familiar shape. More than once we've been told that 'we predict an average review score on Metacritic of between 75 and 85, depending on whether or not the developer addresses the issues listed below'. Often the issues are useful, but publishing execs would only look at the numbers, which always appeared to have been carefully chosen. Why? Well, if you give a score below 75, an alarm will sound at the publisher's head office and all hell will descend on the devs while massive pressure will be applied on the mock reviewer to justify their decisions. These will

be fought tooth and nail by said devs, because to lose this debate is to lose your funding. Meanwhile, if a mock review says you'll hit above 85 and it doesn't happen, then the publisher will never hire them again, believing them to be unrealistic or uncritical.

On *Savage Planet*, we are up to our second of these reviews, and thankfully we have not inherited a scathing takedown which would likely have kicked us into a spiral of self-fulfilling failure, nor a summary frothing with praise which would have encouraged 505 to publish us tomorrow when we are far from finished. Ours was a list of things we knew, a reminder of some we had been pretending we didn't need to fix but now realise we must, and a few holes we hadn't spotted.

Often there are suggestions attached in terms of what they would like to see, but I usually ask the producers to strip those out and just give us the problems: where did the reviewer get stuck, what didn't resonate, what mechanics or ideas did the game bring up early and fail to pay off? We've added a lot of support for our backstory, for example, and commissioned a few more videos the player can discover to give context to previously unexplained corners of the planet.

But even with all the feedback in the world, it's still a small sample size – and you can't dodge the fact that making games is an inherently risky creative endeavour, filled with people desperately trying to figure out how to take the risk and creativity out of it so they can make it safe and predictable and profitable. I respect the idea, especially if I put myself in the shoes of the people with the money who don't have a stake in the creative, but I can't help thinking it's a fool's errand. A mock review might buy you a moment's comfort, but it doesn't change the fact that game development is part technology, part art and part voodoo. Better to see that as part of the magic than try to turn it into factory work.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick





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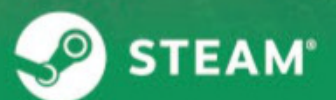
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## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

- |           |  |           |   |           |  |
|-----------|--|-----------|---|-----------|--|
| <b>32</b> | <b>The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening</b><br>Switch | <b>48</b> | <b>The Dark Pictures: Man Of Medan</b><br>PC, PS4, Xbox One | <b>52</b> | <b>Autonauts</b><br>PC                         |
| <b>36</b> | <b>John Wick Hex</b><br>PC                             | <b>50</b> | <b>River City Girls</b><br>PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One        | <b>52</b> | <b>Rainy Season</b><br>PC                      |
| <b>40</b> | <b>Marvel's Avengers</b><br>PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One  | <b>52</b> | <b>Doom Eternal</b><br>PC, PS4, Stadia, Switch, Xbox One    | <b>52</b> | <b>Cris Tales</b><br>PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One |
| <b>44</b> | <b>Kine</b><br>PC                                      | <b>52</b> | <b>Savior</b><br>PC   |           |  |



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# Parallel worlds

The licensed videogame racket used to be a deeply weird scene, the preserve of huge companies with marketing cash to burn and no real interest in the smoke it produced. *John Wick Hex* (p36) creator Mike Bithell semi-fondly recalls his first gig working on Nickelodeon's *iCarly* game for Wii – "not glamorous, but it paid the bills. Ish." But there's a bit of a renaissance happening in the game industry lately, with the keepers of some of the world's most valuable IP actively seeking out creative talent to produce something of real quality.

Lionsgate still sees its multimillion dollar franchise as an indie experiment done good, and so Bithell Games was a natural choice for the *John Wick* game. The filmmaker must be ecstatic – the studio has implemented all the stylish yet cerebral action you'd see in the films into one of the last videogame genres you'd expect. Lionsgate has even involved *Hex*'s makers in the production of the latest film to ensure authenticity.

And the process of creating *Marvel's Avengers* (p40), it seems, has been much the same. Even the famously difficult Disney has relaxed its grasp on

the planet's biggest franchise, allowing a team of talented game-industry vets its own take on some iconic superheroes, with some of Marvel's key people popping by to get involved in shoots. These changes to the licensing relationship feel like a turning-point: other industries are starting to see games not as gimmicky promotional tools, but worthy of investment and respect.

It can be hard to trust your baby with someone else (especially if that baby is a goose that lays golden, company-sustaining eggs). But the passing of the torch from original devs to the next generation of stars with *The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening* (p32) is another sign that, whether it be film, game or otherwise, a different perspective can teach you new things about a world you only ever thought existed inside your own head.

## MOST WANTED

### **Destiny 2: Shadowkeep**

PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One

We're keen to return to the Moon, one of our favourite *Destiny* locales, and for *Armor 2.0*, a sweeping overhaul of gear and abilities. And naturally we're here for new guns. But the biggest draw is cross-save – 60fps PC paradise awaits.

### **Sayonara Wild Hearts**

iOS, Switch

There are only so many times we can listen to the same shitty audio from over-the-shoulder PAX East footage. Simogo, we're begging you – release the soundtrack already, and make our wait for this dazzling thrill-ride that bit easier.

### **Watch Dogs Legion**

PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One

Ubisoft has leaned into the 'granny hacker' marketing angle since the E3 reveal, and rightly so. Never before has a game had us gagging to play a character who keeps a pocketful of Werther's Originals next to her taser.





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# THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING

Eiji Aonuma explains why it's the right time to revisit Link's weirdest adventure

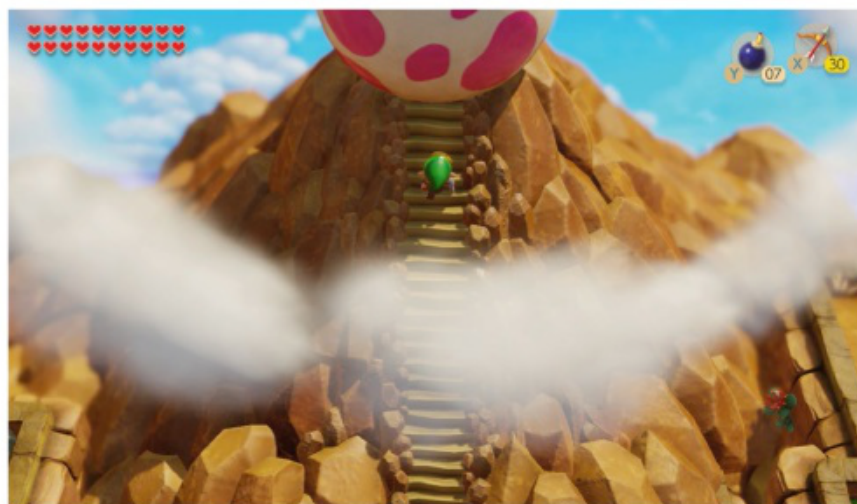
<b>Developer</b>	Nintendo EPD, Grezzo
<b>Publisher</b>	Nintendo
<b>Format</b>	Switch
<b>Origin</b>	Japan
<b>Release</b>	September 20





Aonuma says familiar as it may be to some, to others *Link's Awakening* will seem fresh. "If you only know the old version, you could appreciate the new; if you only know the new, you could also appreciate the old" ▶





TOP Having tested the original game during development, did Aonuma think his colleagues were crazy for including *Mario* characters and side-scrolling stages? "I don't know, maybe a little bit," he laughs. "If anything, I was surprised at the potential games, especially *Zelda* games, could have."

ABOVE Surrounded by clouds, the Wind Fish's Egg is the game's final dungeon.

LEFT Familiar locations look very different in the remake's new style.

BOTTOM Movement and combat feel similar to *A Link Between Worlds*





## THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING

**R**emaking a 25-year-old Game Boy game would, on first impression, appear to an odd way to follow *Breath Of The Wild*; after such a groundbreaking reinvention of the *Zelda* formula, it seems like a step back in more ways than one. But then shifting to a more traditionalist approach has hardly done Mario any harm in recent years. Besides, **Eiji Aonuma** has been thinking about returning to Link's oddest outing for a good few years now. Indeed, when we interviewed him about *Breath Of The Wild* back in E296, Aonuma alluded to making a game about "living as a thief". Now, anyone who's played *Link's Awakening* will remember what happens if you steal from the shop (and for those who haven't had the pleasure, we won't spoil the surprise). So, we ask, the penny suddenly dropping, was that what he was alluding to back then? He's laughing before we've even finished the question: "Yup, that was it!"

Like Miyamoto, then, it's clear Aonuma can't resist dropping the occasional cheeky hint. Little wonder: he's evidently excited about going back to a game that has had a huge impact upon his tenure in charge of the *Zelda* series. Aonuma may have been at Nintendo when *Link's Awakening* was in development, but he didn't have a hand in its creation; rather, he experienced it as a player. "This game has a very special place in my heart," he says.

**Indeed, *Awakening* had** a major influence on Aonuma's thinking when Miyamoto first invited him to direct the game that many still believe is the pinnacle of the whole acclaimed series. "When I started working on *Ocarina Of Time*, this was the first time a lot of us were handling a 3D game," he says. "And so it was a challenge. We didn't know what was right. We didn't know what the correct answer was. But I always had the vision of the dungeons and the gameplay from *Link's Awakening*. I never told anybody specifically, but I always had that in the back of my mind, and tried to convert the feeling I got from *Link's Awakening* into a 3D world." Offering an example, he explains that the Roc's Feather from *Awakening* was the direct inspiration for Link's auto-jump in *Ocarina*.

It's been something of a homecoming for several Nintendo veterans, in fact, including director Takashi Tezuka and story/scenario writers Yoshiaki Koizumi and Kensuke Tanabe. So while plenty of players will be looking forward to having fond memories rekindled this September, the process of remaking it has been something of a nostalgia trip for the developers, too. "It's been a very interesting experience," Aonuma tells us. "Once we had the game at a good point, I had Mr Tezuka and Mr Tanabe play it. And they're like, 'Hmm, can you fix this?' But I'm like, 'No, this wasn't great about the original. I'm keeping it.' So then there's this back and forth..." he laughs. And yet Aonuma admits it's often been the younger staff members who've been the most likely to suggest changes – or, for that matter, to insist on what should be kept intact. "They were the ones that were really passionate

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### ***There's going to be plenty of the strange as well as the familiar in Link's reawakening***

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about having a good balance between the original and the new," he explains.

It's heartening – and not a little relieving, having played the relatively cautious opening 15 minutes – to learn that we can expect a few surprises beyond its charming new look. Not least because it demonstrates that Nintendo has managed to foster a similar creative spirit to a quarter of a century ago, back when relative whippersnappers such as Tanabe and Koizumi saw fit to introduce Chain Chomps, Goombas and Kirbys (or rather Anti-Kirbys) to the nascent *Zelda* formula. The message is clear: there's going to be plenty of the strange as well as the familiar in Link's reawakening. Meanwhile, a new generation can look forward to being surprised by the ingredients we old stagers have come to take for granted. This isn't a *Zelda* like no other, then, but a *Zelda* like only one other – and whether you remember that wonderfully weird four-colour fever dream or not, that's surely something to be celebrated. ■



### **Chamber piece**

Aonuma suggests he's been looking to give his players some creative input for a while now. The Chamber Dungeon feature in *Link's Awakening* – in which you can arrange rooms you've previously conquered into your own custom challenges – represents the first time he's been able to offer that opportunity to *Zelda* fans. "As a dungeon designer myself in the past, I know that when you just leave it open, it's a very hard task to do," he says. "So for players we wanted to make it easy and accessible." The reason it works so well in *Link's Awakening*, he says, is that all the rooms in the original dungeons are the same size. "We thought each room could be like a panel or almost a puzzle piece that could be rearranged."





H | Y  
P | E

# JOHN WICK HEX

An unprecedented collaborative effort  
produces a movie tie-in like no other

Developer	Bithell Games
Publisher	Good Shepherd Entertainment
Format	PC
Origin	UK
Release	TBA

What makes John Wick John Wick? If you answered ‘Keanu Reeves’, then good guess – but you’re only half-right. Wick combines skill, careful planning, improvisation and a little bit of luck to pull off incredible feats of gun-fu. And, fittingly, that’s exactly how *John Wick Hex* came to be.

**Mike Bithell**, creator of *Thomas Was Alone* and known action film buff, was leaving the cinema one weekend with his friend Ben Andac. “I’m pretending I don’t remember the film – I absolutely remember the film, because we were having a conversation about how much it sucked compared to John Wick,” Bithell laughs. While they were on the subject, Andac asked Bithell what his version of a John Wick game would look like. “I was like, ‘Well, the obvious thing would be to do a shooter or action game, but the problem with that is in order to capture the strategy and tactics of being John Wick, that’s not going to work. So actually I would probably make some kind of interesting strategy game that felt a bit action-y’. I thought I was in a conversation with my friend,” Bithell laughs again. “I was interviewing!”

Andac, it turned out, had been hired by Good Shepherd to scout out someone to make an officially licensed John Wick game – and one with a twist. Lionsgate, it transpires, still very much thinks of its film franchise as the

plucky underdog that could; giving the licence to indie-game talent, then, felt natural. For Bithell and team, so did delivering something unexpected. First, there’s the comic book-esque art style. “It’s like, you know in the ’80s, when there was a Robocop cartoon and no-one knew why the fuck they did that?” Bithell says. “It’s like if they did that now for John Wick. So it’s that kind of stylisation – it’s trying to do something that’s more of an adaptation, rather than us just doing a bad John Wick fanfic.”

**True to form**, the mechanical side of *John Wick Hex* suggests the same approach. At first glance, it looks for all the world like a turn-based title à la *XCOM*. Indeed, this was the original plan, before Lionsgate pointed out that Wick is not typically one to wait his turn, and Bithell reassessed. Instead, *Hex* is what he’s coining ‘timeline-based strategy’. Think *Superhot*, with an added UI element. Just as in *Superhot*, time only moves when you do – except, with the help of a timeline at the top of the screen, you can preview how long any particular move will take in comparison to your enemies’ movements. A stealth takedown on an unaware enemy might take two seconds to perform, including the initial movement and the action itself (represented by the pink section of the bar). But a guard ►



Mike Bithell,  
lead developer





At time of writing, Bithell isn't allowed to talk in detail about casting, "which is annoying". Suffice it to say that anyone except Keanu Reeves in *John Wick Hex*'s titular role will have an awfully tough time of it





## JOHN WICK HEX

who's just become aware of our presence and is able (according to the timeline when we hover over them) to fire a shot in 1.2 seconds requires a different plan: a dodge roll, a duck for cover. "It's like video editing," Bithell says, an approach informed by his studio's close work with Lionsgate, as we begin to carefully cut together our deadly melee choreography. And it is a kind of dance, in a way, with *Hex* offering us a free repositioning move on the other side of our hand-to-hand blows to reflect the fluidity of Wick's on-screen antics.

Our takedowns kill weaker early-game enemies, but later on, heavy-duty foes will require more persistence and even more granular time management. "So you'll do a takedown and they'll be on the ground for a little while, struggling to get back up." Bithell points to the gallery scene in the second John Wick film, where previously downed attackers rise up again behind the assassin, requiring

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### ***The more complex levels will test how well you can put yourself in the mind of Wick***

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him to keep his head (and trigger finger) constantly on a swivel. "We were like, 'That's got to be in the game.'"

The more complex levels will undoubtedly test how well you can put yourself in the part-calculated, part-improvisational mind of Wick, requiring both a rigorously thought-out plan of attack and yet also a good deal more initiative than your typical turn-based strategy. "A lot of people play this game defensively," Bithell says, watching us as we risk throwing our gun at a faraway enemy before winding our way through a series of strikes back towards the weapon – then crouching for a more accurate shot on the last straggler. "It's really interesting: when we were playtesting this, the players who are fans of the movies learn the game much quicker, because they understand how to play it right."

But it's testament to Bithell and team's uncannily accurate sense for what John Wick is all about that even the early levels feel true to the films (and undoubtedly look a lot like them too, especially when it comes to a

feature that will allow you to watch your completed brawls back in realtime). Bithell attributes much of it to how supportive Lionsgate has been in the creation of the game, and how closely it's worked with developers – a very different process, he assures us, from his first job in the industry working on Nickelodeon's licensed Wii games. "The crazy part was with [John Wick: Chapter 3], because it wasn't like, 'here's the licence, go make the lunchbox'. It was genuinely a collaboration." He was reading through the script before they even started shooting; he was in the edit suite with director Chad Stahelski while the film was being cut together; he saw the rough version a few months before release and was at the premiere when it finally did. "So with 3, it's this weird thing where I've seen it grow and change. As a fanboy who's never worked in film, it was interesting seeing how all that works."

**More than interesting:** it was essential that he be aware of what was happening in the latest films so as not to contradict anything with the game, even though *Hex* is a prequel and the team largely worked back from the events of the first film. "It was more the world-building: there's a lot of world-building in 3 where they establish more rules of this universe," Bithell says.

But the impact of working so closely with John Wick's creators has clearly had benefits beyond the merely practical. "Like, fog of war in this game is based on Chad's idea," Bithell says, his eyes lighting up. "He and I were playing the game, and at that point you could see round corners, and he was like 'John can't see round corners, Mike. Can you bring the camera down to frame it like a movie?' I'm like, 'That's not how strategy games really work, it wouldn't feel good'. But then I was like, 'There's a thing called fog of war...' There are moves in this designed by the stunt team – like, doing this is like making a game where you have a six-hour 'let's play' of the best player at that game in the world. We look at those movies and go, 'That's how our action should look: how the hell do you build a system of rules and logic that triggers players to play that way?' It's like you've got a little look into the future." ■



### **Movie magic**

At one point in our demo, throwing a gun has more chance of hitting than a straight shot. "We're making a cinematic action game, so it should follow its own internal logic, but it shouldn't be realistic," Bithell points out. He trained at the gym with the official stunt team – "I say training, I mean sweating profusely while they danced around me" – who taught him that Wick's moves should be larger than life. "There are very efficient ways of beating someone up, but they don't do that in the movies, because that's not visually interesting. We have to work out the gameplay logic: so you can throw your gun as a last-ditch thing if you have no ammo, but then you have no gun." On the other hand, the realism of *Hex*'s ammo system throws up tactical wrinkles: reload a gun with nine bullets left, and you'll lose that whole clip entirely, so it pays to manage reloads – again, just like Wick does in the films.





TOP The fog-of-war effect over levels means enemies can sneak up on you, which often prompts quick tactical decision-making.

ABOVE *Hex's* ability to let you peer into the minds of the enemy AI is "modelling that kind of John Wick 'Spidey sense', or whatever you want to call it," Bithell says.

LEFT What Bithell calls "shirted bad guys" are melee brawlers. It's a good idea to keep them at a distance with ranged attacks rather than get in close.

BOTTOM Lead level designer Steve Lee (of *Dishonored 2* and *Bioshock Infinite* fame) is a jiu jitsu nut, and so came up with the idea of the extra repositioning step to let Wick move through actions



Level up individual Avengers, and you can create your own version of them by equipping new gear and abilities. Sadly, we're not sure you'll be able to do anything about their faces







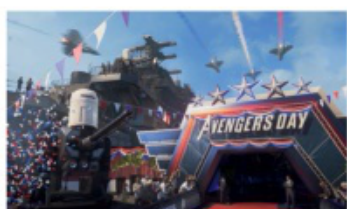
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# MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Strength of character is carrying Crystal  
Dynamics' ensemble adventure

<b>Developer</b>	Crystal Dynamics
<b>Publisher</b>	Square Enix
<b>Format</b>	PC, PS4, Stadia, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	US
<b>Release</b>	May 15





TOP Hulk uses his strength to weaponise his environment – and even other enemies. We see him throw one into another by the legs. ABOVE The story begins on A-Day, a catastrophic attack leading to the Avengers being blamed and shunned



TOP Thor's toolset will be very familiar to *God Of War* players. The god of thunder can also call down lightning. ABOVE Iron Man's repulsors are his main weapon, but he can also use his arc reactor to melt tanks. LEFT By allowing players to level up and customise canon Avengers characters, the devs can have their cake and eat it too. "You can see them become your version of that hero," Napoli says, "which is another reason why we wanted to start fresh from a different point"





## MARVEL'S AVENGERS

The optics of *Marvel's Avengers* have so far crumbled under the weight of scrutiny, but behind the scenes things are looking quietly confident. Yes, the singleplayer demo does look overly choreographed, stuffed to the gills with quicktime events. But amid it all, there are brilliant flashes of the fastidious and creative individuals behind it all.

After watching Thor's hammer and Captain America's shield bounce around rooms at their beck and call, we're not entirely surprised to find ourselves shaking hands with **Vince Napoli**, the designer behind Kratos' weighty, recallable Leviathan Axe. Next, we're introduced to **Shaun Escayg**, previously creative director on *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy*. These are people with a track record of meticulousness, and Marvel has been all too keen to work *with* them, not against them. "We wanted to tell an original story, and they were in sync with us on that," Escayg says, "I draft; I send to my team; my team drafts; we go back and forth with Marvel — it's been very collaborative. And Bill [Rosemann, Marvel Games vice president] is always on my shoots, he loves to see the actors bring stuff to life."

"It's the first licensed product I've worked on, and so I wasn't sure what to expect," Napoli admits. But Marvel has been supportive, sending over its latest comic-book releases — even if they're unrelated to the characters used in the game — in hopes the team will find something to spark new and different ideas. "We've got to do things like pitch them some gameplay stuff. 'Hey, we think this could fit the character, and we'd like to change it like this.' And they'll come back and say 'That sounds awesome — have you thought about something like this?' It feels like they have the same vested interest in just making things as good as possible."

Usually, we'd be inclined to take such a glowing review of Disney's involvement with a pinch of salt. But a close look at the demo seems to back it up. The variation between characters, and the detailed animations on display, speak volumes as the player body-hops between characters. Iron Man blasts enemies out of the sky and barrel-rolls out of the way of incoming missiles. Black Widow mixes gymnastic martial arts with crunchy

pistol fire. Hulk smashes. "Like, if I don't see Hulk smashing a guy, I'm out," Napoli says. "It has to be that, even if it's difficult. Can you pick up two guys and run around with them? That's a ton of work, but we have no choice: we *have* to deliver what people expect."

**And things they** might not. It's always hard to tell how true-to-play these kinds of demos are when the handlers are executing moves perfectly. We're more interested in what happens when an Avenger fails to make a jump, or gets socked in the mouth: clumsiness is part of the territory with Spider-Man, after all, but how do you preserve the superhero fantasy when Captain America stumbles? "It's always about making it look strong, even in hit reacts," Napoli says. "Even missing jumps, it needs to look like they gave it their all. So we go through and do a pass, and say, 'Captain America is going to

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***"Just like in the films and books, a lot of their failings come from character arcs"***

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use his shield to grind on the ground to recover, because that's what he would do. He's going to make use of his environment. He's going to keep looking forward because he has his eyes on the battlefield at all times.'

"That's the best thing about combat-driven character games," he continues, "is that you look at the character, and start designing your combat around them."

Escayg adds: "And just like in the films and books, a lot of their failings come from character arcs. It's kind of a dysfunctional family. And, you know, some of that also translates into the gameplay, so we're really excited about that as well." If he's talking in terms of what canon does to the dynamic of certain character combinations in co-op play, the feeling is mutual. We're all for playing a power fantasy, but so far *Marvel's Avengers* seems to be resisting the glossy Hollywood veneer of superhero perfection in favour of something a little more human — and with these particular humans behind it, that can only be a good thing. ■



### Cinematic universe

We're not surprised to see so many quicktime events in *Marvel's Avengers*' demo: developers still tend to lean on them as a shortcut to 'cinematic' games. But how do you differentiate between making a cinematic videogame and a Marvel movie you press buttons over the top of? "To me, it's pacing," Napoli says. "If you have the right pacing, any gameplay experience can be riveting. We do the QTEs for some of these big, epic moments to keep you engaged, but especially for the co-op, it's a very different style of pacing: we wanted to give you different types of mission structures, ones that are more free-roaming. So it isn't just, 'You have to go down this hallway, and you better enjoy that hallway'. Here's a bunch of hallways, and some will play very differently. That's part of the fun of having such a big world, I think."



Time for the finale!  
Wait, where's Euler?

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## KINE

Puzzles, romance and all that jazz

Developer/publisher	Gwen Frey
Format	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin	US
Release	2019

Frey's looking forward to watching people play *Kine*, whether it be showgoers at PAX or online streamers after launch: "I go back and forth on whether or not puzzle games are fun to stream"

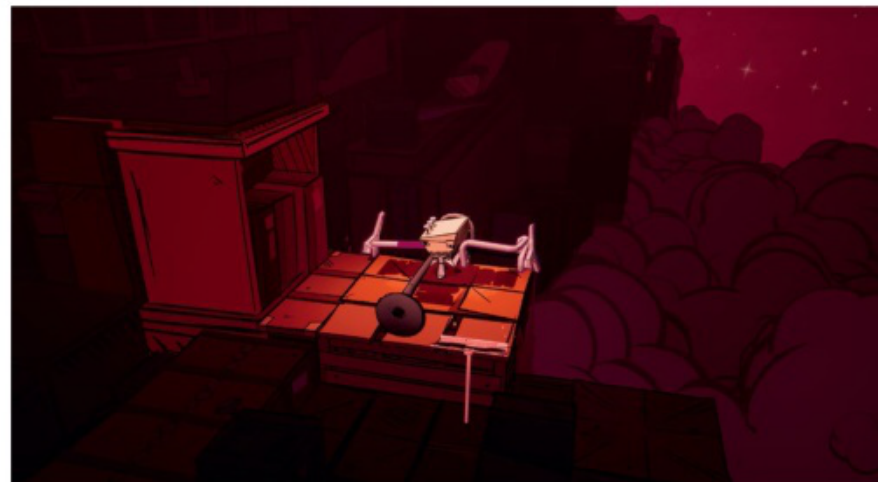
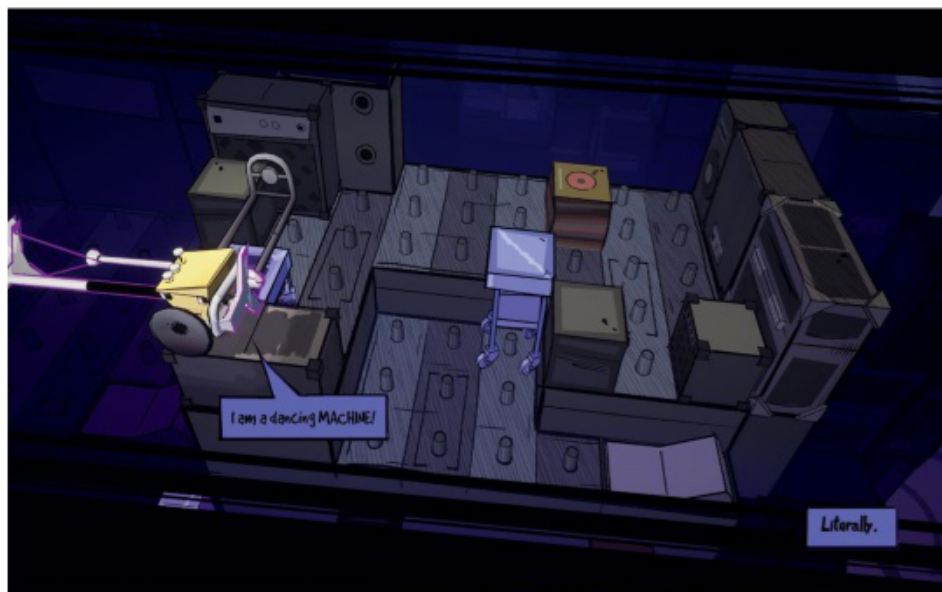




It happened again...

This is perfect!  
Sidekick! Assemble!



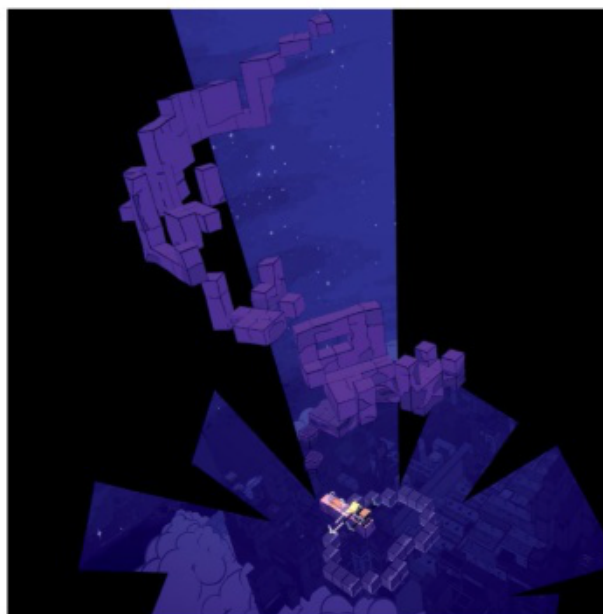


ABOVE The look of the world may change, but there's one constant: the bassline. "My musician almost killed me," Frey laughs. You'll see the bassist at the beginning of the game, she says, hinting that they may have more of a role if her plans for a follow-up come good.

TOP RIGHT The overall style is faithful to Frey's original designs, but she's worked with environment artist Rick Nath to develop the aesthetic. "He's really good at colour theory and that sort of thing, whereas I tend to focus more on character-driven stuff. We complement each other really well."

MAIN Ah, the Tunnel Of Love – although, as in *La La Land*, the burgeoning relationship between Euler and Roo will have its ups and downs.

BELOW RIGHT Your aim is always to reach a specific point, but the objective changes throughout. Having collected sheet music for a studio session, you'll need one of your trio to hit that record button







KINE

**K**ine is a bright, upbeat puzzle game about a would-be jazz trio, in which a La La Land-style love story sits alongside deep-cut references to animation terms and gags about Euclidean space. It is, needless to say, unlike pretty much anything else you'll play this year – which has already caused creator **Gwen Frey** a few headaches. “I definitely understand how difficult it is to do your job now,” she says. “People say, ‘Describe Kine.’ And I’m like, ‘Can I just show you a GIF? You’ll get it in 30 seconds’”

Or a trailer, even; seek out *Kine*’s debut teaser for a triumph of short-form storytelling. Otherwise, she says Stephen Lavelle’s *Stephen’s Sausage Roll* has proved a useful point of comparison, in that both games revolve around the challenge of manoeuvring an unconventional character around a 3D grid. Or three, in this case: the game’s stars, Euler, Quat and Roo, dream of becoming musicians, which is handy since one of them is part-trombone and another resembles an accordion. The trombone’s slide and the accordion’s bellows extend so they can cross gaps alone; later, they’ll need to rely on one another’s unique abilities to make beautiful music.

It’s a puzzler with a sense of purpose, then – which is crucial, Frey says, to win over those who need a little more incentive than the satisfaction of beating a tough challenge. Though she doesn’t want *Kine*’s story to get in the way for puzzling purists. Any dialogue can be skipped, but then Frey, an experienced animator by trade, is accustomed to telling stories through movement – such as a stage when two of the characters go on a date. “I started looking at footage of paired figure skaters,” she says, “And I tried to design puzzles so these two would look like they were skating around on this dancefloor together.”

The romantic element was inspired partly by *La La Land* – that the characters’ yellow bodies matches the colour of the dress worn by Emma Stone’s wannabe actress Mia is no accident – but there’s a more complex reason behind the love story, and it involves the characters’ names. “Euler and Quat are two different methods of rotation, and Roo is short for rotate order. Euler gets into jams

a lot, and the way you fix it is by changing the rotate order. So it made sense that Euler is obviously madly in love with Roo because he *needs* her,” she laughs.

This little romance is, however, just one of several narrative threads within the game. *Kine*’s nonlinear approach is reminiscent of recent indie hit *Baba Is You*; if you’re ever stuck on a puzzle, you can pursue another storyline for a while until the inevitable epiphany arrives. “I put a great deal of thought into the sequence of levels,” Frey says. “I’ll introduce a mechanic, have a slightly harder version of it, another slightly harder version, and so forth. But I always wanted to have multiple different sections that you could play.” Most players, she reckons, will be able to reach the end of the critical path since the difficulty doesn’t ramp up until the very end. “In general, I think the harder the game is, the more

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**“You’re going to fail sometimes, and I don’t want people to feel bad about that”**

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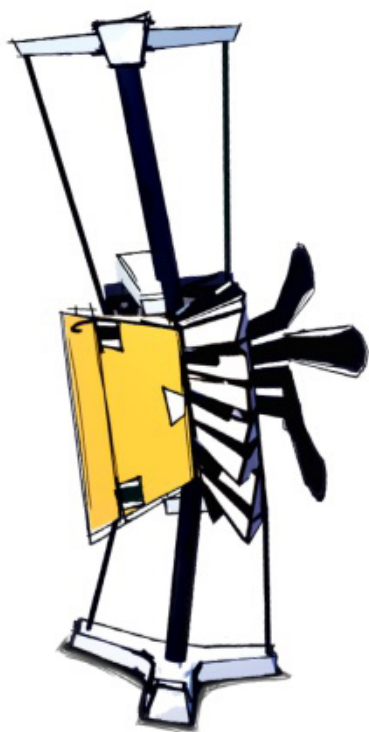
options you have to give people to jump around to different puzzles.”

If the structure is familiar, Frey is aiming to capture a tone you typically don’t see in other puzzle games; this is, she notes, a world away from the “meditative and calm” feeling encouraged by the likes of *Myst* and *The Witness*. Trial and error, she says, is part of the learning process, so why not make failure feel good? There’s already something inherently amusing in the unusual way *Kine*’s characters get around; watching them roll off the edge of the world is funnier still. “You’re going to fail sometimes, and I don’t want people to feel bad about that. That should be something to be celebrated. I think it’s the greatest thing in the world if you can make somebody laugh or smile.” Little wonder, then, that now the game is content-complete – with bug fixing, QA and localisation to come before its release date is finalised – Frey is already pondering ideas for a possible sequel. Here’s to the fools who dream, hmm? ■



### Epic win

Frey had finished designing *Kine*’s puzzles by January and was originally hoping to release her game in July. But her plans changed when the Epic Game Store appeared. “I’ve always been really close to Epic; I love the Unreal engine. Then the storefront launched, and I reached out to them.” The reply came back quickly; Epic had been meaning to approach Frey for some time, but, well, it had been rather busy. Frey got a minimum revenue guarantee, which allowed her to hire outsourcing houses to upres the art – while remaining faithful to the original style – and bring the game to consoles. Meanwhile, she’s used the extra time to give the puzzles and interface another layer of polish. “I’ve had the freedom to take it to the level I always wanted to take it to,” she says.





**Developer**  
Supermassive Games  
**Publisher** Bandai  
Namco Entertainment  
**Format** PC, PS4,  
Xbox One  
**Origin** UK  
**Release** August 30



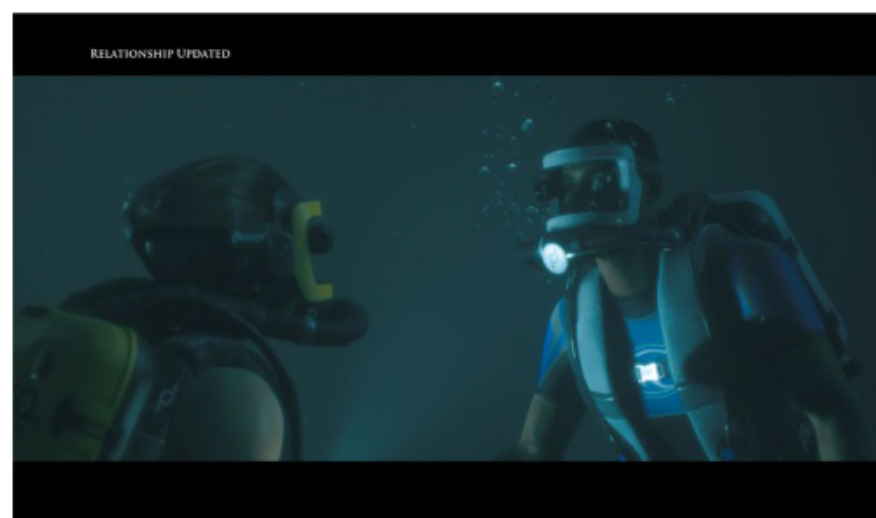
## THE DARK PICTURES: MAN OF MEDAN

Supermassive's dark anthology series suggests a new dawn

**N**ot all horror stories involve stupid college students, marauding spirits and fountains of gore. Some horror stories are real. Okay, 'horror' might be too dramatic a word, but there's no denying that Supermassive Games has had a rough old time of things lately. The success of choice-based schlock-horror drama *Until Dawn* thrust the studio firmly into the limelight back in 2015; its activity since then suggests it wasn't entirely prepared for it. Moving to a multi-project model and continued prioritisation of high-fidelity visuals above all has proved quietly disastrous for Supermassive, with tightly squeezed teams and shorter development cycles producing some experimental but poor-quality work.

It's a relief, then, to see the developer return to what it knows best in *Man Of Medan*. Its B-movie slasher shtick is familiar, the intentional cheesiness legitimising some groanworthy elements in a way that *Hidden Agenda*'s po-faced crime drama couldn't. A group of mannequinesque twentysomethings in search of a good time on the high seas run into a pirate gang and, shortly afterwards, a haunted ship: shenanigans ensue. We enjoy rolling our eyes at ridiculous jump scares and chuckling at the heavy-handed way in which characters are introduced, with traits like "excited" and "reckless" floating in front of their faces that the designers clearly hope will influence your decision-making and have you subverting horror tropes and stereotypes. It's clear the studio is focusing strongly on what players liked about *Until Dawn*.

Indeed, Supermassive's latest mechanical experiment proves it. *The Dark Pictures* games feature both local and online multiplayer modes. Movie Night prompts you to pass the controller between up to five players between scenes. "Seeing people passing around the pad



with *Until Dawn*, playing it multiple times — we hadn't intended it, it emerged from the players," producer **Dom Ireland** tells us. "Seeing that on Twitch and other platforms inspired us to actually make it real."

It's the twoplayer online Shared Story mode that took the most planning and is the star attraction, divvying up characters in scenes between players — and even having them play different scenes simultaneously.

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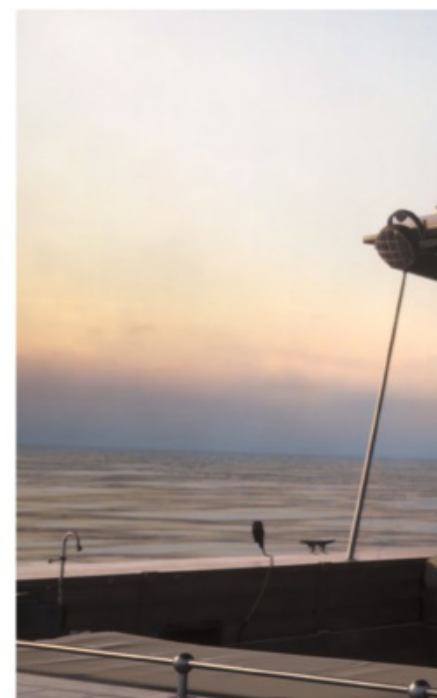
***It's clear the studio is focusing strongly on what players liked about Until Dawn***

---

We take Alex and Julia on a wreck dive while our demo partner stays on the boat, playing through a whole other set of choices that will affect events further down the line.

**Supermassive started building** the first demo for *The Dark Pictures* — from scratch — at the end of 2015 "just to see if we could even do this", authoring the entire game via a system of mapped flowcharts that it

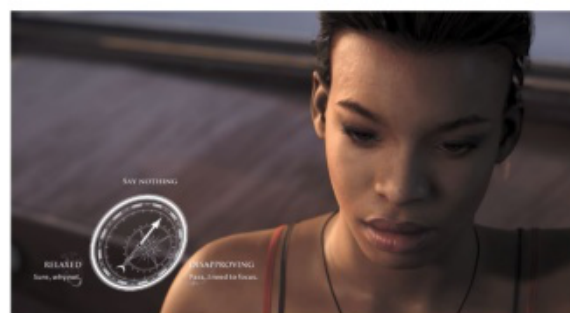
**ABOVE** Changes to your character's Traits, which are 'levelled up' through dialogue choices, will open up or close off options later. Big decisions can lead to a more dramatic Bearings Change that can significantly alter the course of the game







LEFT There are 69 – stop it – potential death scenarios in *Man Of Medan*: you'll need to play the game at least eight times to see them all. BELOW Unlike in *Until Dawn*, stony silence is a regular dialogue option – although this isn't new for choice-based narrative games in 2019, and cutscenes mean it isn't implemented in the flow of conversation half as naturally as in, say, *Oxenfree*



Given Supermassive's track record as of late, we're pleasantly surprised by how likeable *Man Of Medan*'s cast are. Even the insufferably arrogant Conrad has his moments

insists is in a different league of complexity than the likes of *Detroit: Become Human*, even changing a character's delivery and tone for particular lines as relationships fluctuate according to the choices players make. "We're interested to see how Redditors map it out, because it's very difficult for us to do it," senior producer **Andy Nuttall** says.

There are signs of trouble in our demo, however. When our ship's boarded by pirates, we're unaware of why it's happening, which feels unsatisfying. There's no voice chat in *The Dark Pictures*, so talking to our partner in person after the demo ends reveals they'd antagonised them while we were on our dive (we also discover their scene was cleverly and imperceptibly padded out with extra dialogue while we struggled to make sense of the wreck's level furniture). There's a worry, then, that this could be complexity for the sake of it

instead of something that augments the story, and that it might lead to the sort of practical issues such as plot holes or fundamental mechanical flaws from which *Hidden Agenda* suffered terribly. But the move back to tried-and-tested schlock-horror for the first *Dark Pictures* game feels like Supermassive trying to restore confidence in a playerbase that is, surely, wary of the studio's next gimmick.

"The only way to grow is to experiment," Nuttall says, "and you just have to take something you think is going to work, put it out there and hope other people will think the same way. With *Dark Pictures*, the core of it is singleplayer – but singleplayer and multiplayer were both developed together as a kind of symbiotic thing, so we don't really see multiplayer as a risk." We hope he's right: this time around, we'd like to see Supermassive make it out alive. ■

## Doki doki panic

There are plenty of nods to *Until Dawn* in *The Dark Pictures: Man Of Medan*. The Premonitions that, when interacted with, show a brief glimpse of a potential future for a character that may inform the decisions you make, recall Totems. Meanwhile, the Curator (who will appear throughout the anthology) plays the same fourth-wall-breaking narrative role as Peter Stormare's unsettling psychologist Dr Hill did. Sadly, the callback to *Until Dawn*'s 'don't move the controller' prompts is less successful: it's a sort of limp rhythm game where you must simply press X at the right time to match a character's pounding heartbeat in tense scenarios.



Developer Wayforward  
Publisher Arc System Works  
Format PC, PS4, Switch,  
Xbox One  
Origin US  
Release September 5



## RIVER CITY GIRLS

Smacking down gender, but not genre, stereotypes

Well, we suppose it's about time: it has taken 33 years and almost 20 games, but Kunio-kun has finally got himself into trouble he can't escape from alone. The star of *River City Ransom* has been kidnapped, along with his brother in arms Riki Samejima; as you might have guessed from the title it's up to their girlfriends, Kyoko and Misako, to find them, face down their captors, and unshackle their chains.

*River City Girls* may subvert one of the oldest story setups in games, but mechanically it's largely happy to conform to type. This isn't so much a retro pastiche as it is the continuation of a lineage — though naturally a

game being old-fashioned on purpose doesn't stop it feeling a bit over the hill. Movement is awkward and stilted, limited to the cardinal directions. The combat system is rudimentary: light and heavy attacks, a jump, a block. And despite our best efforts, there doesn't appear to be too much here for combo-lovers. The best we can find is a quick string of lights followed by a single heavy blow.

In fairness, our demo contains only the first level of the game, and we think of other seemingly retro brawlers — developer Wayforward's own *Double Dragon Neon* in particular — that have started out comfortably familiar and peeled back the

Stunned enemies can be recruited, and each type performs a different attack when you summon them. Despite our best efforts we can't use them as combo extenders. Later on, perhaps



This game shop sadly isn't available in our demo; it, and others, will be critical if the game is to break out of its early mechanical fug







Contrary to what these screenshots suggest, this is not a game in which young anime-styled women carry heavy objects above their heads. While it's a genre standard, the high, short-range throw arc means we don't use the move much



layers of complexity as you progress. There's a hint of that halfway through the stage, when we level up. A pop-up window tells us our stats have increased, and we've learned a new move too; it's only a stomp move for hitting opponents after a knockdown, but given Wayforward's track record it seems safe to assume – or hope, at least – that better tools will arrive later on.

### Given Wayforward's track record it seems safe to assume that better tools will arrive later

The guard button, meanwhile, performs a parry when perfectly timed to meet an incoming attack – no mean feat in a game like this, since enemy moves come out quickly, the timing window is extremely tight, and you risk being hit in the back by someone else while you wait for the person in front to make their move. Still, the reward is commensurate with the risk, a long stagger animation turning momentum back in your favour.

You have to stun an enemy with a few hits before they can be grabbed, at which point you've the option of a genre-standard backthrow or flurry of gut-punches. This can

be a little hard to read – sometimes opponents get up from a knockdown stunned, and we accidentally snap a few out of dizzy with a single light attack – but it's worth looking out for, with the throw one of few good options (in the demo at least) for crowd management. Stun the last enemy on screen and they'll beg for mercy; grab them and a button prompt appears, letting you recruit them to your cause. Tap LB in open play and they'll rush in from offscreen, performing a single attack. Cooldowns ensure that these assist moves can't be spammed; they have their own health bar, too. You needn't take too much care with them, however, since another recruit is likely just around the corner.

After finding the opening level a tad simplistic in singleplayer, we hope co-op might prove the difference. Unfortunately there's little change, beyond the two of you constantly interrupting each other's attack strings (as in *Double Dragon Neon*, friendly fire is activated by default; happily it can be toggled in the pause menu). If there are any tag-team moves, they're not on show here, and the lack of launchers or juggles leaves little room for improvised team combos.

Still, there's buckets of charm in the lead characters and the setting, regardless of whether you're a fan of Kunio-kun games. The soundtrack features names such as Christina Vee and **Edge** favourite (and My Favourite Game alumnus) Chipzel. And if the combat doesn't sing, perhaps sidequests and stat-boosting gear will make up for it. It's a curious thing, *River City Girls*: it puts a 2019-era spin on the damsel cliché but seems otherwise happy to be rooted in the past, perhaps mindful of the first two words in its title, conscious of not upending its legacy entirely. ■

### Tales of the city

While much of the detail will be lost on a western audience – very few of Kunio-kun's outings have been localised over the years – *River City Girls* is steeped in series lore. The protagonists hail from earlier games in the series: both featured in Super Famicom brawler *Kunio-tachi No Bunka*, while Misako was a soccer-team manager in a NES game that was released internationally as *Nintendo World Cup*. The opening level's end boss, the burly hall monitor Misuzu, is another series fixture. Expect much more of this in the final game: ArcSys owns the lot, after all, after acquiring the rights to the entire series in 2015.

Crowd management is naturally much harder when playing solo. While you'd expect co-op to raise the enemy numbers, we're surprised to see it also increase weapon drops







ROUND-UP

## DOOM ETERNAL

**Developer** Id Software **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** PC, PS4, Stadia, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** November 22



No online game is eternal, but Id's hoping its new asymmetric multiplayer variant, Battlemode, will engage its playerbase for longer than 2016's vanilla deathmatches. This snappy best-of-five mode pits a single Doom Slayer against two demons. Slayers have access to portals that zap them to the other side of the map for hasty retreats or table-turning flanking strategies. To make their job more difficult, they'll need to defeat both demons within a 20-second span, otherwise the first will respawn with their health halved. Meanwhile, Bethesda is promising free post-launch updates, with extra maps and more playable demons.

## SAVIOR

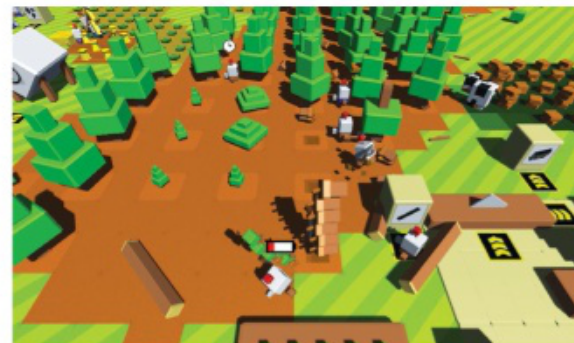
**Developer/publisher** Starsoft Entertainment **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBA



Formerly named *Into The Rift*, this 2D action-adventure distinguishes itself through its hero's athleticism. From somersaults over gaps to arrow-dodging backflips and swan dives, protagonist Sam moves with effortless grace. She's a capable fighter, wielding a pole which can parry blows and be thrown like a boomerang – handy for triggering distant levers. With branching dialogue and extensive level transformations, all her adventure is missing, really, is the letter 'u'.

## AUTONAUTS

**Developer** Denki **Publisher** Curve Digital  
**Format** PC **Origin** UK **Release** Autumn (Early Access)



Gary Penn's Denki makes a welcome return with this charming town-builder where you start with nothing more than the world's natural resources and a clutch of indolent villagers. To develop a self-sufficient settlement, you'll need the help of programmable robots, who'll learn to copy your actions so you can automate, well, pretty much everything.

## RAINY SEASON

**Developer/publisher** Inasa Fujio  
**Format** PC **Origin** Japan **Release** 2019



This delightful narrative short lets you explore a Japanese family's home after a downpour puts paid to their planned trip to the funfair. Developer Inasa Fujio finds magic in the mundane; as the kids grow bored at being stuck indoors they'll drift off into flights of fancy, imagining glowing koi swimming around their waterlogged garden.

## CRIS TALES

**Developer** Dreams Incorporated, SYCK **Publisher** Modus Games  
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One **Origin** Colombia **Release** 2020



A JRPG from Colombia might sound like a contradiction in terms, but this handsome homage acknowledges its debt to *Chrono Trigger* and *Bravely Default*. Temporal chicanery (and a clever splitscreen effect) means past, present and future versions of the world can exist simultaneously; a particular boon when your hand-drawn art looks this good.



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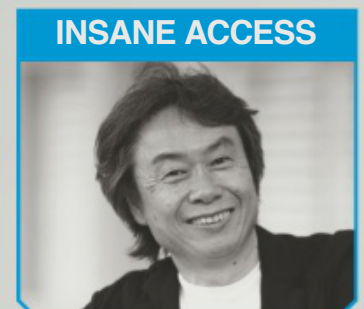
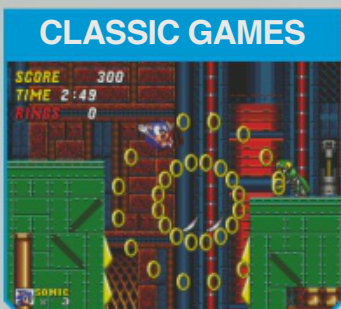


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# #336

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



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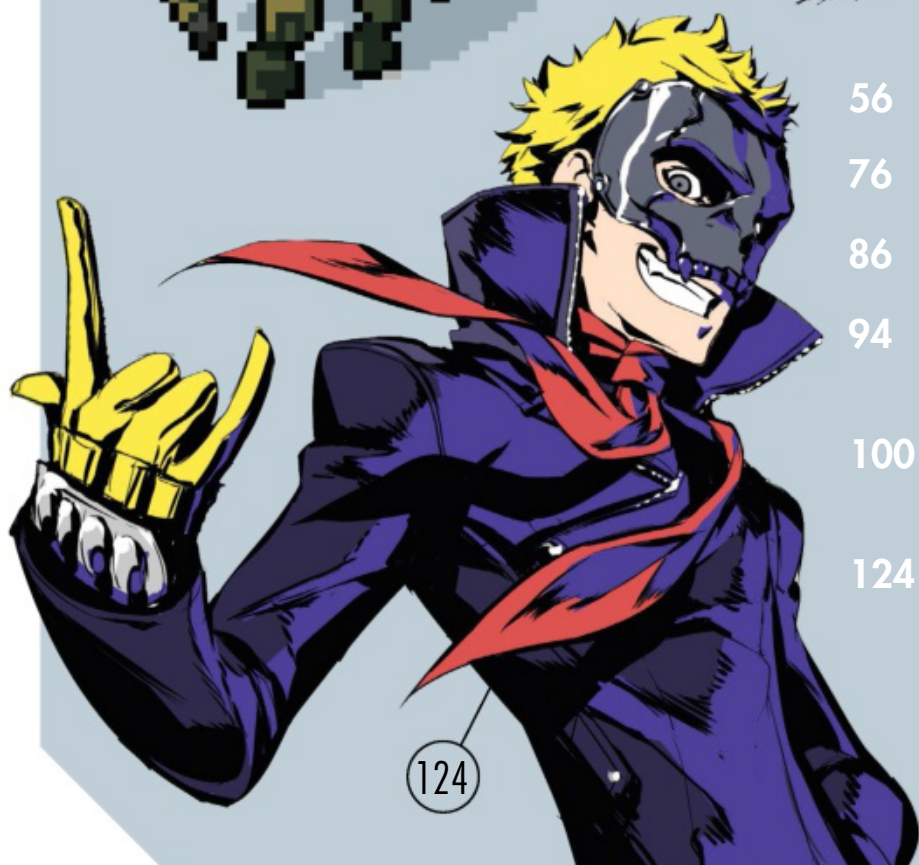
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# C O M E T O G E T H E R

The co-creator of Halo assembles a team  
of youth and experience to push the  
sci-fi shooter in a thrilling new direction

By NATHAN BROWN

Lunchtime, and V1 Interactive's president and creative director, **Marcus Lehto**, has just dropped a bomb on a group of his young staff with ruthless efficiency. Not figuratively, you understand: he speaks fondly, even paternally, of the more youthful members of the 30-person team making *Disintegration*. We're watching a match of the game's multiplayer component – a Capture The Flag-style mode called Retrieval – that began with Lehto apologising in advance for what he assumed would be a poor performance on his part. Then he wipes out most of the opposing team with a perfectly placed, and timed, bomb. Minutes later, he does it again. "I usually don't do that well, honestly – I'm pretty sure they were just letting me nuke them," he admits afterwards. "The kids were being nice to dad today."

They're also a vital part of the game that 'dad' and his crew are making. Lehto spent almost two decades at Bungie and, as is often the case when grizzled vets of big-budget development strike out on their own, there are plenty of former members of his *Halo* team on the V1 payroll. Yet there's youth here too, thanks in part to his time, after leaving Bungie, as a volunteer student mentor at the DigiPen Institute Of Technology,

a renowned game-development school just down the road in Redmond, Washington. When V1 was properly established, he brought on some of the brightest students he'd encountered; as the studio has grown, more have come on board. "It's critical for us," Lehto says. "And I say that in every way: it's critical for our health, for the vibrancy of the studio, and for bringing in a perspective of the game industry that is new and fresh, that maybe some of us older folks aren't in such deep touch with anymore. It's fantastic."

Whether the kids were going easy on dad or not, the influence of both camps on the game they've been making is plain to see. *Disintegration* is shot through with Bungie DNA: not just in its visuals, which you'd expect from the artist behind the original Master Chief, but in how it plays and feels. But you can see the youthful perspective here too, in combat that is fast-paced and tactical, and also in a multiplayer mode built on hero moments that, as we scurry between ten workstations to try and keep track of the action, proves tremendously watchable. Between them they have come up with something that is at once familiar and fresh. They might just be onto something. ►



Game *Disintegration*  
Developer V1 Interactive  
Publisher Private Division  
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One  
Release 2020

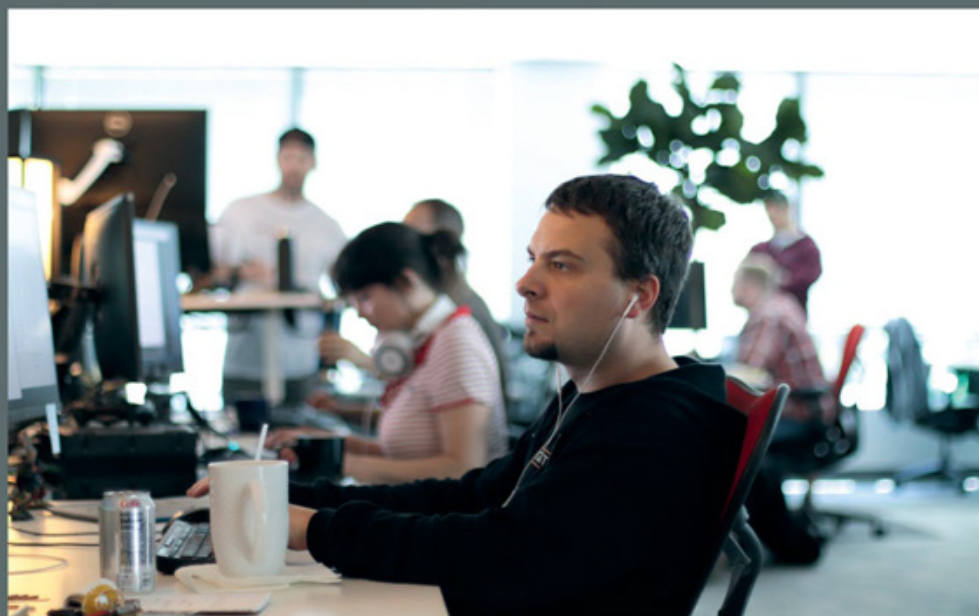




**Disintegration is set** on Earth around 150 years in the future, with humanity in the grip of a pandemic that threatens its extinction. To counter it, scientists have devised a method of transplanting the human brain into a robotic chassis – a procedure called integration – where it can live for up to 300 years. The idea is to outlast the virus, at which point the process can be reversed and humanity rebuilt. Almost immediately, a wedge was driven between integrated humans and the remaining ‘naturals’, resulting in a civil war. The integrated forces, by now known as the Rayonne, won at a canter, and as the game begins one of their commanding officers, Black Shuck, is dispatching his armies around the United States to mop up any remaining natural stragglers.

Not all of the integrated agree with the Rayonne’s post-humanist ideology, however. Many try to defect, and most are caught, destroyed and recycled – but one who does make good his escape is Romer Shoal, the game’s protagonist. Before the outbreak, Shoal was well-known and respected, and was among the first to go through the integration process (early on, it was the preserve of the wealthy). He was the host of a Top Gear-style show about gravcycles, hovering search-and-rescue vehicles that, during the war, were retrofitted with weaponry. In the conflict’s aftermath, Black Shuck tasks Shoal with finding and repossessing gravcycles; since they can hover they’re ideal for rooting out naturals in hiding in awkward terrain. Shoal does as he’s told, but isn’t happy about it, and starts to sell some of the gravcycles on the black market, specifically to a rebel group calling itself the Human Liberation Coalition, or HLC. Black Shuck gets wind of it, and imprisons Shoal; he breaks out, and so begins his quest to assemble a ragtag band of integrated rebels to take the fight to the Rayonne, and eventually bring down Shuck.

“All these characters want, ultimately, to become human again,” Lehto explains, adding that there’s a strong suspicion that the pandemic was caused by someone high up within the Rayonne, to hasten the spread of integration. “That’s the carrot hanging out on the end of the ►



The studio’s entire headcount fits into an area a little bigger than Bungie’s reception area, though a corner meeting room, kitchen and demo area just about give it the edge. Downstairs, a small in-house motion-capture facility lets staffers suit up and record rough animation data for quick iteration of ideas



DISINTEGRATION  
IS SHOT THROUGH  
WITH BUNGIE DNA:  
NOT JUST IN ITS  
VISUALS, BUT IN  
HOW IT PLAYS  
AND FEELS



Marcu Lehto, president  
and creative director,  
V1 Interactive

## COMMS LINK

Bungie isn't the only big-name studio represented at V1: Washington state is fertile ground for game companies, after all. V1's CTO, Michael Gutmann, spent 16 years at Zipper Interactive, the developer of the *SOCOM* series which, prior to its closure in 2012, was headquartered across the road from V1's offices. "Mike and I have been good friends since 2000 – he lives down the street from me," Lehto says. "We don't mix our peanut butter and chocolate very much; he runs the operational, business side of things, as well as driving the entire engineering team, while I run the creative vision. It works out really well." Gutmann isn't there for our visit: he's taking part in a week-long, 450-mile bike ride across the state of Iowa. We'd have done it as well but, you know, prior commitments.



This crashed ship, Old Meg, serves as the player hub area. Over time, characters you meet will return here to dole out quests



stick – but they’re not sure that carrot actually exists. They’re working hard to find their loved ones that might still be alive; they want to find and secure what’s left of humanity.

“They’re not like this tight-knit group of Navy SEALs. They’re journalists, they’re teachers, they’re metal-shop workers and cops. They have different agendas, political agendas and cultural upbringings. They don’t all get along great with each other. But they’re survivors, and they’re out there to help in the fight.”

This is one of several ideas Lehto had, and was working on, after he left Bungie. “I’d poke around – I did some story-building for a couple of other ideas – but this one kept percolating back up to the top to the point where I was, like,

why don’t I just pursue that? It sounds really fun.” Originally it was envisioned as a spiritual successor to *Myth: The Fallen Lords*, the Bungie realtime tactics game released in 1997, which was the first project Lehto worked on at the studio. But as he developed the first prototype, “it quickly took a very, very different path. We wanted to try introducing a firstperson shooter mechanic into this universe, and see what we could do to invent, essentially, gameplay mechanics that no-one else is doing right now.”

The result sees you, as Shoal, piloting a gravcycle – there are several class types in the game, varying in weight, mobility and loadout – while simultaneously commanding a squad of up to four AI-controlled ground troops. The latter






"I DID SOME  
STORY-BUILDING  
FOR A COUPLE OF  
OTHER IDEAS, BUT  
THIS ONE KEPT  
PERCOLATING BACK  
UP TO THE TOP"

come in four class archetypes, each with a bespoke loadout and a special ability activated using the D-pad and governed by a cooldown timer: grenades, slow fields, mortar strikes, ground pounds. "The way we're developing the game," Lehto says, "is thinking of you as the pilot, the gravcycle as your right hand, and your crew on the ground as your left. You are a unit together, not two separate entities."

This is the core of the game, and in and of itself is full of possibilities. Shoal can lay down heavy fire to keep the enemy hunkered behind cover, then send the infantry around to flank. He can do the opposite, keeping the enemy busy while calling troops in trouble back to safety. Even established enemy types feel fresh with


this setup: the time-worn FPS cliché of the foe who rushes you and explodes in your face requires not only that you burst it quickly, but that you keep both yourself and your squad at a safe remove. While the mere mention of tactics suggests a gentle pace, there's a surprising zip to *Disintegration's* combat. Enemies fight in numbers, the gravcycle moves at a fair lick and there's always something that seems to need your urgent attention. "We try to keep the mechanics as simple as possible for directing them to locations or targeting specific units," Lehto says. "We wanted to limit the amount of micromanaging you're going to do, because you also have to play a shooter at the same time." ►





IT'S A RISK TO  
PUSH YOUR FORCES  
FORWARD DURING  
A BUSY FIREFIGHT,  
SURE, BUT THE  
ALTERNATIVE IS  
MUCH WORSE





The gravcycles may look like machines of war, but their designs also remind you they were originally built as utility vehicles



## COME TOGETHER

It's a fine foundation, and one Lehto's team has built upon with gusto. Scenery is fully destructible, adding not only a great deal of spectacle but also even more tactical flexibility: sure, you could flank that enemy that's pinned behind cover, but you could just as easily blow a hole in the wall it's hiding behind. Though if that suggests you're best off hanging back, the game's health system pushes you forward. While a manual heal is available, when it's in cooldown you'll have to rely on the medkits dropped by enemies as they die; the brief puff of healing nanites will not only act as a restorative for anyone who walks (or flies, in Shoal's case) through it, but will also greatly speed up their cooldown times. It's a risk to push your forces forward during a busy firefight, sure, but the alternative is worse: when an ally's robotic body dies, it ejects the armoured canister containing their brain, a timer warning you that unless you pick it up quickly you'll fail the mission. Secure it and you'll still have to endure a cooldown timer before they can respawn – and from what we've seen, things can quickly fall apart from there.

Over the course of the campaign, Shoal and crew will work from the Rocky Mountains in the far north through the Arizona desert and then to the west coast, where rising tides have formed inland seas. The final assault on Black Shuck will be set in Iceland, though V1 is in no mood to show that off just yet. From what we've seen, though, the game is surprisingly large given the modest size of the team making it. Lehto admits it wasn't meant to be this way. "When we pitched to Private Division, we knew we were building a game with a smaller form factor. We were saying four to six hours. Well, now we have 13 missions, and probably a minimum ten- to 12-hour campaign for your average player. The multiplayer side of things has grown considerably too. The game has grown in scope, and some of that's just because we can't help ourselves: we love making this game. But we also understand that in order to really make a satisfying experience, to tell the story we want to tell, and to deliver on the multiplayer side, we need to give the player enough breadth and depth to make it worthwhile in the first place." ►






Some delightful Unreal-enabled explosions. The first prototype was built in Unity, but the team realised more power was required







This is no post-apocalypse;  
merely an Earth that has  
been ravaged by virus and  
war. It is still built, but  
much of it stands empty

IT IS NOT A  
CRITICISM TO SAY  
DISINTEGRATION  
BOTH LOOKS AND  
FEELS LIKE A  
BUNGIE GAME







**It is not** a criticism to say *Disintegration* both looks and feels like a Bungie game. The old '30 seconds of fun' adage runs deep; combat is both fast-paced and tactical; and the need to push forward to heal and reduce cooldowns is built on the same idea of overcommitment as reward that made us fall in love with *Destiny*. "It's inescapable for me," Lehto says. "It's in my DNA: that art style, the kind of action that is particularly interesting to me and I think would be interesting to others as well. When we were first pitching the game around, it was both an attractor and a detractor. When I pitched it to Microsoft, they were like, 'It looks a little like *Halo*'. I said, 'What do you expect? I was the guy who made *Halo*'."

He really did. While he'd been working remotely for Bungie on *Myth: The Fallen Lords*, it was when Lehto moved his family to Chicago and

joined the studio properly that he was tasked with working with Jason Jones on the foundations of what would become *Halo*. Ironically, it was also originally intended as a successor to *Myth* – "It was literally *Myth* with sci-fi dudes on the ground" – but things changed as the pair started experimenting with a thirdperson view and more of a focus on action. A concept artist had built the first version of Master Chief with a slender, anime-like frame; Lehto redrafted it and, nine iterations later, had crafted what would become one of the most recognisable silhouettes in videogames. He also designed the Warthog, the Pelican, the Forerunner structures and half the missions. He continued to work on *Halo* right up until he shipped *Reach* as creative director. Understandably, then, *Disintegration* reminds us of *Halo*. That is no bad thing. Indeed, it's a core



These concept sketches are vintage Lehto style: ships are angular, cool and intimidating, while every humanoid character has a distinctive silhouette. Elites have bespoke shapes too, and are gently colour-coded



"AS NEW PEOPLE  
HAVE COME ON  
BOARD, EACH OF  
THEM BRINGS A  
SPECIAL FLAVOUR  
TO THE GAME"



part of the appeal. But it is far from the sum of it.

"It's got its own character that we worked really hard to develop," Lehto says. "As new people have come on board, each of them brings a special flavour to the game – be it characters, design mechanics, or even on the engineering side. It's really something that I embrace here at the studio, making sure that everybody is invested and involved. We build the project together."

That's made clear during a studio tour – if you can call it that; it takes three minutes – after which we ask where Lehto sits, expecting him to show us a plush corner office, or at least a window seat with a view of the forest that surrounds the studio. He points to a standing desk in the middle of the floor. Lehto encourages the team to be open, and passionate, in discussions about the direction of the game. "Sometimes, when that happens,

especially the younger folks, the way they verbalise constructive feedback doesn't come out so constructive sometimes." He tells us how Joe Arroyo, the first of his DigiPen hires, took him to one side after a heated debate. "He goes, 'Marcus, I'm really sorry'. But I think of us just as peers; that's the way we are. I'm not his boss."

"There's no fear in the office. At Bungie we actually had that culture of fear with some people, especially as it got bigger. I didn't like that part of it; I strongly disagreed it with it. It's another reason for why I wanted to just kind of break out on my own."

Further justification for that comes in the form of Unreal Engine, which allows for rapid iteration and is a world away from Bungie's powerful, but famously cumbersome, in-house tech. There are no overnight build times here, and both Lehto, ►





## FOG OF LORE

Given that Lehto worked on every *Halo* game from 2001's *Combat Evolved* until *Reach* in 2010, we have to wonder whether he sees *Disintegration* as a one-off, or merely the first part of something bigger. "We set out to build something that could, if things go well with the game and with Private Division, expand," Lehto says. "We've already built a story that goes deep into *Disintegration 2*; the framework is already there." It's not just a matter of ambition, however: reality gets in the way too, and a 30-person team can only accomplish so much while meeting milestone deadlines. "You should see our task list in Jira; half of the stuff we'd love to get to is already moving into *Disintegration 2*. We didn't know when we first made *Halo* that it was going to strike a chord with the public; we were excited about it because we were having fun making and playing it, and that's the same vibe we have with *Disintegration*."







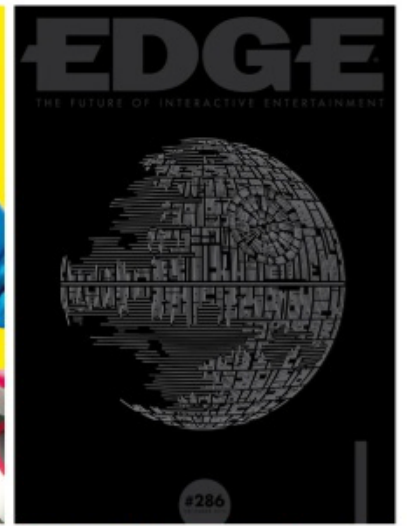
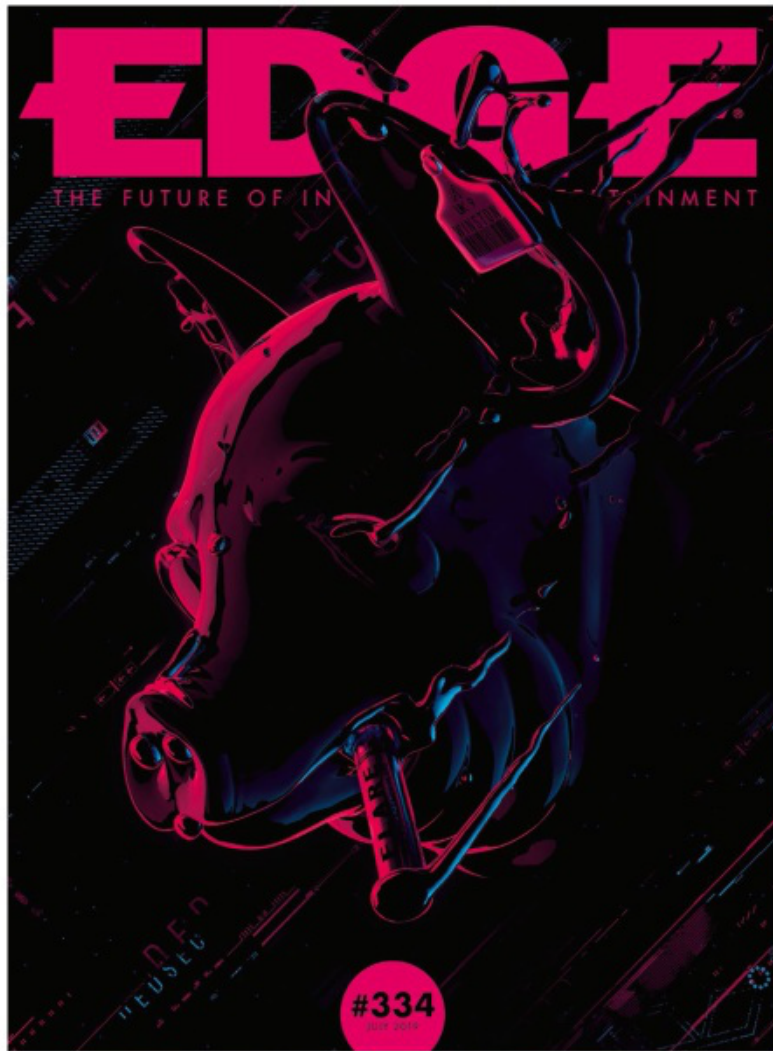
On missions you gather Salvage, a currency of sorts used not only to fulfil sidequest requirements, but also to power the campaign's progression system. You'll spend your surplus on chips that can increase your squad's max health, damage output and so on – essential given how quickly the stakes ramp up

and the former Bungie staffers he's brought on, delight in Unreal's speed. "One of the first things they do is they walk in the door and say, "Okay, Marcus, what's the process of actually getting this level up and running, or bringing this asset I'm working on into the game?" I'm like, 'You just import it and can play it right now.' They think I'm joking. They totally freak out. It's great." Epic's engine isn't perfect – Lehto points out that it has legacy code stretching back to the UE3 era, and V1 has developed its own tools for certain things to sit on top of it – but it's clear that without Unreal, *Disintegration* would likely be a very different game.

It's certainly played a vital role in empowering a small team to aim high. Lehto is clearly proud of the fact that *Disintegration* has been made by a team of just 30 people; it's not necessarily something that end users will care or even know about, but given that his *Halo: Reach* team topped out at around 250 people, and Bungie is now three times that size, Lehto's pride makes sense. And it's resulted in a game that feels particularly timely. When Lehto is walking us through the multiplayer component, we ask if it features a progression system. He says no. Two years ago, that answer would have been suicide. Today it is a breath of fresh air in the context of an industry that continues to serve up theoretically infinite service games to increasingly time-poor players. A 12-hour campaign, and a multiplayer mode that won't punish you for not playing every night, feels like a welcome change of pace.

It's also perfectly in keeping with what we've seen so far from Private Division, the Take-Two publishing label that is seeking to revive the middle ground between small-scale indie game-making and the lavish, risky excesses of big-budget development. *Disintegration* might just be the game that best showcases Private Division's mission: it's a big game made by a small team, comprised equally of veterans and novices, turning out something that is at once traditional and forward-thinking. It's also, seemingly, a game in which the kids don't always win. Sign us up. ■





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# D I R

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# A C T

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**W**e've been on a few studio tours in our time, but we have never seen anything quite like this. Rebellion's new digs are spread across multiple cavernous buildings, a former printing press spanning 220,000 square feet, sat on a 12.5 acre plot. A walking tour takes half an hour and, we're assured, barely scratches the surface. When Rebellion CEO and co-founder **Jason Kingsley** visited it for the third time, he went off on his own, poking around. "I was like a child going to a new house," he tells us, "charging around like a lunatic, looking for dens and stuff like that. It was filthy, but it was absolutely brilliant. It felt like I was urban exploring — except we own it."

Kingsley describes Rebellion, which he co-founded in Oxford in 1992 with his brother Chris, as a sort of "accidental company". Still privately owned, it has been run, and has prospered, for almost 30 years on a sort of ad-hoc basis. There is always a plan, of course, but the brothers rarely think more than three or four years into the future, and many of the most critical decisions they have made have been about what felt right at the time. The latest of those choices might be the biggest yet, and this sprawling studio-to-be is the proof of it. Rebellion is going to the movies. ►





# E C T I O N

After 27 years in games, comics and books, Rebellion plots its boldest development yet

By **NATHAN BROWN**

Photography **Phil Barker**





This might, on first inspection, sound like a special sort of madness. But there is logic to it, just as there has always been sound reasoning behind Rebellion's more leftfield business decisions. Most significant is the fact that Rebellion is actually a film company already, and has been for some time. In 2003 it acquired Audiomotion, a VFX and motion-capture firm set up in the mid-1990s by a group of UK game developers. The operation grew, but its funding collapsed, its headcount of 40-odd people reduced suddenly to just seven. Rebellion swooped in, acquiring the company but keeping it at arm's length; it would use Audiomotion for its games if it needed its services, and Audiomotion would bill Rebellion like any other client. But it was run as a standalone business, and as such could continue to work with external companies.

It really has. Game developers came from all over the world to use the company's facilities – a series of stages in Wheatley, just outside Oxford, that seems plenty big enough until we're shown around the new studio later on.

## REBELLION IS ACTUALLY A FILM COMPANY ALREADY, AND HAS BEEN FOR SOME TIME



Early on, the game industry was its primary source of business, but over time Audiomotion's services have become of progressively greater interest to Hollywood. The company's first big-name movie project came in 1999, when Audiomotion produced the Colosseum scenes for Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Since then it has added to its showreel the likes of *World War Z*,







Ready Player One and Star Wars: The Last Jedi, and many more besides.

“The big thing for us is how the game industry and film industry are sort of coming together,” says **Brian Mitchell**, until recently the managing director of Audiomotion (he’s now head of the newly minted Rebellion Film Studios). He recalls how, when Audiomotion was helping Jager Developments shoot cutscenes for 2012 shooter *Spec Ops: The Line*, the director was able to walk a shoulder-mounted camera around a virtual world, lining up his cutscene shot in realtime. That’s manna from heaven for a lot of today’s movie makers. “Virtual production, virtual cameras – we’ve been doing that sort of thing for a long time,” Mitchell says. “It’s the world we live in. A lot of the software and techniques are now compatible, and all the problems – latency and other things that went against it – all those things have been solved now. It’s much more production-ready, which is obviously far more film-friendly.”

Games are still a big part of Audiomotion’s business: its recent projects include cutscenes for *Forza Horizon 4*, the ambitious live-action crowd in *Guitar Hero Live*, and over 120 hours of cinematics, action and performance capture for *Horizon Zero Dawn*. But while in the early days

games made up around 90 per cent of Audiomotion’s work, these days it’s a more even split with film – fluctuating from month to month, of course, but Hollywood’s impact on Audiomotion’s business has been significant. Suddenly Kingsley’s belief that a videogame company can start making films doesn’t seem quite so outlandish. He’s already seen it happen.

The stars are further aligning through 2000 AD, the sci-fi comic book which has been running since 1977 and which Rebellion acquired in, appropriately enough, the year 2000. It licensed 2000 AD’s most famous face, Judge Dredd, to DNA Films for the 2012 3D movie *Dredd*, which Kingsley says was “very well received. And we thought, you know what? It’s kind of a fun space, film and TV. But at the same time, if you give your toys to somebody else to play with... well, they’re playing with them. And yeah, they pay you money, which is great. But you don’t get to play with them in the same way.”

Hence the newly formed Rebellion Film Studios, through which Kingsley and co will get to play with their own toys, and are building a quite cavernous playroom to house them all. First on deck is a movie based on *Rogue Trooper*, to be directed by Duncan Jones (*Moon*, *Warcraft*), ►

- 1 Just one of several buildings at the new Didcot facility. Mitchell is mulling over whether to raise the lower roofs.
- 2 Audiomotion’s main sound stage is empty when we visit, though prop makers are busy setting up for a shoot.
- 3 Brian Mitchell, until recently the managing director of Audiomotion and now the head of Rebellion Film Studios





## ROVERS RETURN

There's much more to Rebellion's comic-book business than 2000 AD. It's spent the recent past quietly hoovering up a treasure trove of classic comics. In 2016 it acquired the publishing rights to the back catalogue of Egmont, giving Rebellion the likes of Roy Of The Rovers, Action, Misty and Whizzer And Chips. And last year it picked up the Ti Media comic archive, which stretches back to the late 1890s. "There was a tonne of fantastic content that wasn't available to anybody," Kingsley tells us. "It's part of our cultural legacy as a nation, but it was just completely buried in somebody's archives. I'm quite proud of that. I like opera, but I also like my 'low' culture. I like my sci-fi, my action, my adventure; I like, when I'm being entertained, to go on escapist adventures. That's a big part of what Rebellion does."

and a TV series, Judge Dredd: Mega-City One. But the Didcot studio isn't solely being built for Rebellion's own work; it will also be available for hire by the wider film industry, where demand for studio space has never been higher. "There's a huge explosion in production happening in the UK at the moment, because of the SVODs – the Netflixes, Amazons and Apples of this world," Kingsley says. "They're great, and are providing tonnes of really high-quality material, but the physical infrastructure isn't there."

When the Kingsleys were first contemplating getting into the film-making business, they started searching for suitable locations for shoots. None were exactly on their doorstep. "We were going to have to go to some far-flung parts of the world, and I just thought, 'That's not fun,'" Kingsley tells us. "I've got horses. I've got a company to run. One of the reasons I get up on a Monday morning is because I enjoy doing business, and the business of creativity. And I wanted to get involved – materially, very seriously involved – in the film and TV stuff we do. But if it was in South Africa? It's a wonderful country, but it's a long, long flight, and it's a big commitment of time. Chris and I, in typical Rebellion fashion, said, 'Right. This is a problem. How do we solve it?' So we looked around, and found this massive printworks."

A former newspaper printing press is, it turns out, an excellent location for a film studio. For a start, it's brilliantly soundproofed – necessary before to keep industrial noise in, and now essential to keep the outside world at bay (just as well, since the facility is 100 yards away from a busy railway line). There are three electrical substations on site, with power for each reserved on the national grid, meaning the new studio can comfortably accommodate even the loftiest of shoot requirements. Perhaps best of all, it's an absolute rabbit warren, a labyrinthine series of rooms of all shapes and sizes – as Kingsley puts it, "a studio and the location in equal measure." On our tour we see plenty of what we'd think of as sound stages: big square rooms with four walls and a roof. But we also see much more, with Mitchell pointing out that one corridor, flanked by sloping glass walls overlooking what was once the main printing press, is a set-dressing away from being a supervillain's lair. Elsewhere, an



1 Characters from 2000 AD will form the backbone of Rebellion's move into film and TV, at least at first.

2 Rebellion acquired the comic in the year 2000, because Kingsley "felt it needed to be rescued. It was on the wrong trajectory, and we rescued it"





open floor looks like the perfect venue for a shootout in a multistorey car park (Mitchell sees it as housing production admin, however). Down in the facility's depths is a tracked recess, running right down the middle of the room, that used to be used for transporting materials and finished newspapers; Mitchell has already spoken to a nearby railway museum about borrowing some old track. If a shoot needs a subway station, there's one right there on site.

Mitchell is a way off satisfied, however, constantly pointing out walls he wants knocked down or moved, at one point even indicating a roof he wants to raise. He'd like to level one of the big sheds around the back of the main building and start again. Audiomotion doesn't only operate in its own studio: it goes out on location

## A FORMER NEWSPAPER PRINTING PRESS IS AN EXCELLENT LOCATION FOR A FILM STUDIO

too, and as such Mitchell knows how the likes of Pinewood, Leavesden and Elstree work – and, indeed, how they don't. Rebellion is thinking hard about not only the structure of the Didcot studio, but its layout; how it needs to be arranged to ensure it can be used efficiently. Pinewood, the UK's most famous studio, first opened in the 1930s. Its architects naturally did not consider how a 2019-sized production would turn up for work en masse. Mitchell is thinking about how security will deal with new arrivals, about ►





## EXIT MUSIC

The brothers may have steered Rebellion through almost 30 years of success, but there's a time limit on every family business: Kingsley admits that, unlike in Hollywood, there are no videogame dynasties yet, as the industry is too young for it. With time marching on – and with Microsoft showing a particular appetite for buying long-running indie studios with ageing founders – we wonder whether he would be open to selling up. “My exit’s a six-foot hole in the ground, a wooden box with a tree planted over it,” he laughs. “We’ve not been approached, possibly because we give out spiky independent vibes. My MBA colleagues tell me there’s a balance if you’re selling your company between being desperate for money and being slightly aloof, so that the price goes up. We’re not that desperate for money. Also, I keep doing interviews like this, where I talk about how I want to remain independent.”



where people will park, about office space and catering – ensuring that crews on tight production schedules can get in and start working as quickly as possible.

We put it to Kingsley that this is exactly how we’d expect a game developer to approach something like this. Look at the market leaders, identify what they do well and what they don’t, then consider how the latter might be fixed. “That’s exactly right. And we’ve been playing around with lots of ideas – I laughingly suggested we make a *Film Studio Tycoon* equivalent, because, effectively, running a film studio is its own game. It’s interesting how the things people learn get applied directly to it. Pinewood and these other places are fantastic, but they’ve grown up by accident. There’s a big fancy house, a shed here, a shed there – and suddenly, ‘Oh, we’ve got some more space, let’s put another shed here’. They’ve just had to: they’ve got a certain amount of space, and they’ve got to put as many walls, ceilings and roofs as possible in that space. That’s all. People just need space.”

**We are starting** to suspect that Kingsley’s description of Rebellion as “an accidental company” is just modesty on his part. There’s a real plan here, one decades in the making; one that perhaps wasn’t always on the agenda, but has forever been coming to fruition in the background, as the brothers bought a VFX

company they liked that was in trouble, then acquired an ailing comic book they’d loved as kids, and ended up one day with a successful film company and some beloved IP ripe for the adapting. “I would say it was *mostly* planned,” Kingsley says. “We wanted to do these kinds of things, Chris and I, but the [decision] to make a move in that direction is partly opportunistic.

“You could argue Rebellion is an accidental company, but we’ve built it up. And the reason for building it was to do cool things, fundamentally, and to do that you need a structure around you. You know, if you want to go deep-sea diving, you need a proper diving suit. Running a business and doing interesting things, you need a whole bunch of talented people around you, you need massive infrastructure, routes to market, all that gubbins. It’s all necessary to enable you to do cool things, make some money, and do it again. That’s really the motivation behind it all.”

Crucial to all this is the fact that, decades later, Rebellion is still owned by its founders. The Kingsleys need answer to no one but each other and their staff. Where risks have been taken over the years – not just the move into film, but also the transition from a work-for-hire studio to a developer of its own IP, into multiplatform development and self-publishing, into comics, and books, and VR – they have been managed. The stable parts of the business help ensure that, if a decision fails, it will not take the





## DIRECT ACTION

company down with it; as Kingsley puts it, “we would be extremely unlikely to bet the whole company on a roll of the dice.” And since it’s a private company, there’s less pressure on new ventures to succeed immediately, or even succeed at all. There’ll be no angry shareholders demanding a cut in the wage bill after a bad quarter; for all that the Kingsleys often seem to act in the heat of the moment, they’re able to take



## “THE REASON FOR BUILDING IT WAS TO DO COOL THINGS, FUNDAMENTALLY”

a longer-term view than other companies that appear to have more of a plan in place.

“We’re fully independent — it’s just me and my brother,” Kingsley says. “So all the money we’re putting into our games is technically — no, *literally* — our money. And when you do that, you go, ‘Bloody ’ell, actually, that’s quite a big risk.’ We’re putting tens of millions of pounds of our own money into making games for people to play. But it’s also a privilege, because it’s a fun thing to do. Sometimes there’s an opportunity and you go, ‘Yeah, that just feels right, and it’s not going to burst the bank. Fine, let’s do it.’ We don’t have to get the money back this quarter or I’m going to get fired. We can say, ‘You know what, this is never going to make us any money, but I think we ought to do it! There are things that are important other than money. That’s dead easy for me to say because we’ve got quite a lot of money, but there really are. I really do make decisions based on, ‘Okay, money is part of it. But passion, and interest and heart, and *the right thing* are components of it too.’”

It is easy to forget, particularly as we walk around a 220,000-square-foot studio lot, that ►

**1** There’s no firm completion date for the Didcot facility. Kingsley points out that it’s already up and running, and will be built and rebuilt according to each project’s needs.

**2** Mitchell describes motion-capture acting as somewhere between TV and theatre; your movements have to be a little exaggerated to ensure they’re picked up by a game engine.

**3** The suit of armour isn’t just for show: Kingsley loves this stuff. His YouTube channel, Modern History TV, has over 330,000 subscribers



Rebellion still makes videogames. Yet Kingsley is at pains to remind us that games “are absolutely at the centre of what we do, and I don’t think that will ever change.” The firm took three to E3: *Sniper Elite VR*, *Zombie Army 4*, and *Evil Genius 2*, the sequel to a game Rebellion acquired the rights to 13 years ago. Other unannounced games are also in the making. The main development studio in Oxford is a single, open-plan space, with over 100 staff working on multiple projects and the 2000 AD crew beavering away in the far corner. There’s another studio in Liverpool, and two more have been added to the stable in the past couple of years: Rebellion Warwick was formed from the ashes of the Oliver twins’ Radiant Worlds, while the acquisition of TickTock Games, which assisted Rebellion on *Rogue Trooper Redux* and the Switch version of *Battlezone*, led to the creation of







## KINGSLEY REMINDS US THAT GAMES "ARE ABSOLUTELY AT THE CENTRE OF WHAT WE DO"

Rebellion North. The sexier work may be going on half an hour down the road at the film studio, but games will continue to define Rebellion just as much as its work in the movies, and elsewhere.

"I'd like us to be in a situation where we're fully self-funding, vertically integrated in games, in books, and arguably TV and film," Kingsley says of his vision for Rebellion's future. "I'd like to be able to fund a movie, take it to market, show it to an audience and have them pay us some money which we put back in [to the business] and make some more. That's how I want it to be, and with the rise of digital and streaming, that's ever more possible."

"We're in a really unique position in terms of creating content. We have a huge back catalogue of IP, and a huge group of creative individuals. We have technology structure: we have our own engine, we have tech specialists in Audiomotion. We have production facilities. I'd like to see the film and TV stuff massively expand. I'd like to see games expand, but not necessarily massively. I don't want to be doing too many projects, because if we do too many, I won't be able to be involved in them. We don't want to be a sausage factory, just churning out titles that we have no input into." That's almost a shame: think how many sausages you could make in 220,000 square feet. ■

**1** *Sniper Elite* is Rebellion's most successful series. Running since 2005, it has spawned comics and a spin-off novel.

**2** *Evil Genius 2*, due next year, is the sequel to a 2004 management sim in which you build a supervillain's empire.

**3** The main floor of Rebellion's Oxford studio. Just out of shot is the 2000 AD team; at the far end you can spot Jason Kingsley's office by the telltale suit of armour







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# ARRY

Thirty years after the Wall fell,  
games are exploring what it means  
to remember a divided Germany

By JEREMY PEEL

# AIN



Rain is falling on the morning of November 14 as the 8.15 to Rathaus Spandau pulls away from Falkensee Bahnhof. A vertical blade pulls across the sheer windscreen, neatly dividing the glass into wet and notwet. Cobbles beneath the wheels rattle the frame of the bus until it reaches the main road, where the percussion becomes irregular, kicking in at intervals as the wheels dip in and out of potholes. These pockmarked streets are shared with the Trabant, the boxy sedans which had seemed so modern in the 1950s; now, in 1989, their missing turn signals make them an antiquated hazard. Nobody gets off at the last stop before the border checkpoint, a fresh breach in the Wall that opened up for traffic just yesterday. For decades, passing through could have meant imprisonment or death. But at a press conference four days ago, the GDR's governing party announced an end to travel

suddenly, the architecture is quite radically different, a lot more Brutalist in the east," he says. "That includes urban planning: in the west they ripped up all the tram lines and replaced them with car-friendly roads. And the other thing is the people."

West Berlin is home to Turkish communities recruited after 1961 as Gastarbeiter (guest workers). By contrast, East Berlin areas like Lichtenberg – which housed the headquarters of the Stasi, the German Democratic Republic's sprawling intelligence service – are distinguished by their Vietnamese population, started during socialist migration in the 1980s. Those old capitalist and communist battle lines are still apparent, even in the makeup of the city's population. It's perhaps then not surprising that Ashdown and two of his former Yager colleagues, artist Rafal Fedro and designer Jan David Hassel, imagined a game world where the Berlin Wall still existed into 2089. *All Walls*

## "YOU CROSS THE STREET AND, SUDDENLY, THE ARCHITECTURE IS QUITE RADICALLY DIFFERENT"

restrictions between East and West Germany. "As far as I know, it takes effect immediately," East Berlin boss Günter Schabowski had said. "Without delay."

He was wrong – the party had intended the border to open up the following day – but it didn't matter. Hours after his comments were broadcast, 10,000 people were at the Bornholmer Bridge checkpoint in Berlin. In the absence of orders, the border guards relented, but stamped the passports of those at the front of the queue in such a way as to deny them re-entry. It was a final, impotent act by a state still working to keep tabs on its people, even after the point it had lost the capacity to wield that coveted information against them. Cardboard signs sit in the windows of the Rathaus Spandau bus, hurried and temporary. Public transport routes were one of the first things to change when construction of the Berlin Wall began in 1961, and when it fell they quickly reverted. At the end, buses announced the return of personal freedom in all its everyday mundanity.

**This journey was** recreated in detail for *OMSI2*, the German simulator which meticulously models the experience of Berlin bus drivers between 1986 and 1994. Such is its verisimilitude that **Isaac Ashdown**, a game developer and resident of the city since 2008, recognises his own regular ride from Spandau across the former border. "That's actually a route I take fairly often, because my favourite lake in the city is one that was on the border," he says. "It went right down the middle. I go there with my dog in the summer." It's one of many ways the city's history has revealed itself to Ashdown. "It's not something I really put any thought into before," he says. "I moved here for the gay scene and because I got a pretty good job." By the time he left that job, after the cancellation of Yager's *Dead Island 2*, he was fascinated by the way in which the line through Berlin had become visible to him, even in the Wall's absence. "You cross the street and,

*Must Fall*, a tactics and espionage game set in the nightclubs of a future GDR, is set in a divided Germany where both sides on the front of the Cold War have become only more entrenched, thanks to the development of time-travel technology that allows agents to counter each others' moves in retrospect. The trio of developers, known as Inbetween Games, added another 'S' to the Stasi to create STASIS.

There's something deeply scary about the idea of these notorious secret-scribblers cataloguing not only a citizen's past, but their future as well. In the GDR's 40 years, the Stasi produced a number of files equivalent to all of Germany's records since the Middle Ages. How full would their filing cabinets have been after 140? That fear becomes palpable in the dialogue sequences of *All Walls Must Fall*: interrogations in which your STASIS officer flirts or threatens their way to information about an imminent nuclear attack. "Ahh... you must be that suspect I saw so much about," you might bluff. "I know what you'll do tonight. Doesn't look good. At all." Ashdown explains: "We wanted these people in the clubs to feel helpless, because the authority is constantly rewinding the clock and changing what's happened to them."

This state of temporal helplessness captures the MO of the Stasi more perfectly than a strictly historical representation ever could. The GDR's enforcers tortured people the traditional way, yes – but by the 1970s they had developed ways to control people that didn't leave bruises. In a process codified as Zersetzung, or "degradation", they subtly undermined targets' self-confidence, secretly wrecking careers and relationships. Their most effective manipulation took place in bland interrogation rooms, where they unpacked the intimate details of their victims' lives – in one case, reading a citizen's love letters to an Italian boyfriend back to them. Zersetzung often enabled the Stasi to recruit informers, but was designed principally to 'switch off' their enemies – removing the light from behind their eyes. ►

## HARD LINES

*Jalopy's* story of displacement is a personal one. Prymachuk's own grandfather's background was a family mystery: changing borders meant he wasn't sure which country was home, and all of his documentation bore different names: Pawel Przymacek, Pablo Pricazuk, Paul Prymachuk. He reminisced about a place where storks perched atop wooden houses. "We'd assumed he was Polish," Prymachuk says. "So much so my father had the flag tattooed to his arm. Turned out where he was actually from is now Ukraine. Though when we all visited there together as a family, the houses did indeed have storks atop them."



Your first act in *Jalopy* is to stick a new, jarringly miscoloured door on your car, emblematic of compromised Socialism





# BINARY DOMAIN

n Bar

## TALK TO HIM

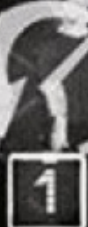


Dragan Müller  
Dragan Müller (Pistol)



Talk

*All Walls Must Fall's*  
Berlin clubbers have  
the appearance of  
2D puppets in a 3D  
world, amplifying  
the heavy atmosphere  
of manipulation







The resulting nihilism is visible everywhere in *All Walls Must Fall*. Drawing from the underground punk-rock scene of East Germany and the modern-day clubs of Berlin, Inbetweenegames created a Berlin whose people have decided nothing matters. There's an apocalyptic edge to the hedonism of the procedurally generated clubs that make up the levels, where patrons dance nude and slack-bodied, and violence is only ever a misjudged compliment away. "I like to go out and party," Ashdown says. "But there are definitely people you meet in that scene, generally who are addicts of some kind, who have given up." Even your STASIS agent is utterly at the mercy of his own handler, teleported back and forth through the game's timeline, unable to verify which of his experiences of the night still stand and which have been reset. "Time-travel stories are a classic sci-fi trope, like *Minority Report*," Ashdown says. "Here they're using it not to prevent crime, but just to make you feel like shit."

Although this fictionalised GDR has clearly recognised the benefit of letting its citizenry blow off steam, there are echoes of its real-world culture of restriction, too. *All Walls Must Fall* smartly blends the terminology of covert gay slang – 'friend of Dorothy' – with the idea that in this world, The Wizard Of Oz would constitute an "illegal holo". In the real East Germany, party-approved television was so notoriously uninformative that the area around Dresden which couldn't be reached by West German TV signal was known as the 'Valley Of The Clueless'. And in November 2089, the ways people sidestep the state's prohibition are clearly still very much alive. There's something about this mixing of the historical with the contemporary in *All Walls Must Fall* – even the 'turbo' Trabant that awaits you outside each mission – that makes the danger of the Wall and the Stasi felt. It wipes away the sepia and replaces it with neon.

That's only appropriate. Even now, Germans make reference to the 'wall in the mind' to account for the differing cultural identities of Easterners and

Turkish immigrants who move to East Berlin for work, only to be wrenched apart for the better part of their lives. On the August 1961 weekend when the GDR closes the Berlin border, Hasaan and his wife are unfortunate enough to be on the Western side looking for work. They're permanently cut off from their young child in East Berlin, who is left in the custody of their friend, Lutfi. This slow-burn tragedy forms the backdrop of *Jalopy's* 1990 road trip – in which you, the Wall baby grown up, accompany Uncle Lutfi out of Berlin towards Turkey, to bury your father's ashes and, afterwards, meet your mother in West Germany for the first time in nearly three decades. It's a tale scattered across the state-redacted documents and tear-stained letters carried in Lutfi's case, which you can only read while he sleeps in motel rooms. But the broader tale of a falling Iron Curtain is more easily spotted.

Throughout *Jalopy* you take care of an ancient Laika 601, a fictionalised Trabant, which threatens to break down at every juncture. It performs admirably: not as a vehicle, but as an allegory. In its dying days, East Germany was run by old men who refused to acknowledge the change sweeping the Eastern Bloc, even when it came from the mouth of Mikhail Gorbachev himself. Driving this knackered old symbol of the state, waiting for the wheels to literally fall off, you can feel it. "None of that's really a credit to me," *Jalopy* creator **Greg Pryjmachuk** says. "The fraternal socialist states were full of this symbolism in all aspects of day-to-day life. We've just had the Chernobyl TV show blow up on our screens because the control rods were made of boron tipped with graphite – because it was a cost saving. If you're looking into this period you're going to be tripping over this stuff."

*Jalopy's* open road, dotted with forests, lighthouses and concrete highways, represents connection – just as it did for the people of Germany when travel restrictions opened up in 1989. "Not just from one place to another, but whoever you're travelling with," Pryjmachuk says. "There's the old adage that 'Life's

## WHAT ALL WALLS MUST FALL FIGHTS IS THE HUMAN TENDENCY TO PUT THE PAST BEHIND GLASS

Westerners. But for some victims of the regime, the Wall still exists as a terrifying and non-abstract possibility. In the acclaimed non-fiction book *Stasiland*, Anna Funder interviews a mother, Sigrid Paul, who was separated from her sick baby by the Wall until he became an adult. "Who would have thought that a wall could be built?" Paul asks. "That was impossible! And who would have thought at the end that it might ever fall? That was also impossible!" It follows, then, that a divided Germany might be possible again. What *All Walls Must Fall* fights is the human tendency to put the past behind glass – to consider ourselves safe from its mistakes simply because they are over.

**There's a Wall** baby at the centre of another game that tackles life in East Germany with an arresting sense of urgency. *Jalopy* is the fictional story of three

a journey, not a destination', and it's really just a disconnected way of saying, 'Enjoy your time together.'" Your constant companion on *Jalopy's* journey is Uncle Lutfi. He tells his stories the way elderly family members tend to – disjointedly, as if absent-minded or struggling to access old details and emotions. At times he speaks with fondness for the GDR, a place that gave him a clear role and a sense of shared national purpose. This is what the Germans refer to as *Ostalgie*, a portmanteau that folds in the German word for 'east'. "I just wanted to try and make a game with a more honest, humane focus to its politics," Pryjmachuk says. "The accounts people have after East Germany are endearing." Not for *Jalopy* the espionage drama of the Cold War; no prisoner exchanges on the Bridge Of Spies, the famous Glienicke crossing between Berlin and Potsdam. ►



Like *OMSI2*, *Jalopy* finds its power in the mundane, and a kind of honesty through the simulation genre.

Prymachuk was hesitant even to include the border checkpoints that punctuate your ride from East Berlin to Istanbul, not wishing to join the list of game developers with 'AK47 model' on their CV. But there's power, too, in portraying the stricture of the failing Bloc. Sitting, eyes forward, as the guard rummaging in your boot shakes the car back and forth on its suspension, the sudden constraint is shocking. "You've got this stark contrast going from the freedom of choice on the open road to doing what the guards tell you," Prymachuk says. "The player has to make some compromises if they want to continue to exercise their freedoms." These border searches can be tense indeed, since you're often smuggling contraband between petrol stations. Although you're subsidised by Uncle Lutfi, you have to engage in capitalism to keep the car going, stripping abandoned Laikas for parts to exchange for engine oil and tyre repair kits. It's another strong metaphor for the ideological failings of East Germany, which enjoyed the option of selling dissidents to the West, solving its political problems at a profit. "When I come to think of why this political system failed where it did," Prymachuk says, "I tend to think of what [Mao successor] Deng Xiaoping said: 'It doesn't matter if the cat is black or the cat is white. So long as the cat catches mice.' Whether you're being subsidised by your uncle, or selling wine at a profit, it doesn't matter so long as the wheels are rolling."

It's the contradictions of East Berlin that Prymachuk found so irresistible when picking a setting for *Jalopy*. The Wall, he points out, was built with supplies sold to the GDR from West Berlin – the very border built to protect East Germany from the economic drain of young professionals leaving the country. And the Fernsehturm, Berlin's TV tower built to show that socialist power was greater than God, has its view blinded by a light flare in the shape of a cross on sunny days. "People have a tendency to hurtle towards zeal

for those impacted by Zersetzung – the ability to confirm suspicions about why they were turned down for a job, or who sabotaged a car. But it also let East Germans know exactly who had betrayed them.

**German reunification, then,** has been a process of forgetting in order to get along. But it's left the world at risk of forgetting the people of East Germany and their stories. "People don't talk about the Stasi, for example, as openly as they talk about what it was like not to pay for public transport," Ashdown says. Ashdown, who lives about 300 metres from the Wall, doesn't need his memory of the GDR and its people jogged. In the winter when the trees are bare, he can see its most potent reminder from his window. But for those too young or distant to remember, perhaps these games can pull East Germany from the history books and make it real again – despite the fact that confronting that reality is almost a rebellious act.

*All Walls Must Fall* was designed to draw uncomfortable contemporary parallels to the past – from its provocative title, to its concept art, which replaces the GDR-era figures in the Wall's famous 'fraternal kiss' graffiti with Trump and Putin. But Ashdown isn't convinced Inbetweenegames has converted anyone. The far-right complains the studio braced for never arrived, and the audience that did play the game was politically conscious before it released. Prymachuk, similarly, thinks it would be arrogant to assume that *Jalopy* has changed anybody's outlook on Trump's border wall or the West Bank. But these games have purpose enough: not to alter today, but to honour the suffering of ordinary East Germans over four decades. "I think it's important to tell it from the perspective of the Berlin Wall, because these things did happen," Prymachuk concludes. "These people deserve to be remembered."

Only in *OMSI2* do the stories of ordinary East Germans reach a non-politicised audience, one not

## MORE WALLS

The *All Walls Must Fall* that shipped was originally intended to be Act One in a larger story that straddled East and West. In the second act, the perspective would likely have shifted to West Berlin to focus on a different character with a similarly nihilistic arc. And in the third, both would have met at the centre of the Bridge Of Spies, the iconic border checkpoint. "That's when shit really goes down, and the revolution maybe begins if you want it to," Ashdown says. "The idea was that one ending was going to be the wall falling."

## PERHAPS THESE GAMES CAN PULL EAST GERMANY FROM THE HISTORY BOOKS AND MAKE IT REAL AGAIN

because it's easily digestible," Prymachuk says. "I think contradictions probably keep us human."

Stasiland writer Anna Funder has described East Germany as a bell jar which, although lifted once the Wall came down, left everyone in place. Victims of the state who chose not to move away continued to live alongside their Stasi abusers, as well as friends and colleagues who had informed on them. At one time, full-time collaborators who passed information to the Stasi made up one in every 63 citizens; including occasional informers, the total rises to one in every 6.5. The volatility of the spies and spied upon living together was exacerbated by a 1992 government ruling that made Stasi records open to the public. As a former East German, it is your right to visit the Stasi Records Agency and read the files that were made about you. The decision provided important catharsis

already steeped in its history. The work of two Berlin natives, Marcel Kuhnt and Rüdiger Hülsmann, the sim is not built to evoke Cold War tension or Stasi cruelty. It's merely a fond recreation of the pair's bus rides home after school, on the fake-leather seats of West Berlin's distinctively beige double-decker, the Man SD 200. Its players come to hear the roar of diesel engines, not messages of freedom – but perhaps they get something else into the bargain. Once the 8.15 to Rathaus Spandau passes through the membrane into the West, it's as if a filter has been lifted. The cars are suddenly multicoloured. The streets are wider, and the landscape gains a new vertical dimension that speaks of wealth. As the tarmac smooths out, the rattle diminishes, giving way to two distinct whines from the machinery below. The bus accelerates, and the two noises rise, separately, in discordant harmony. ■





Set *OMSI2*'s timeline  
before November 1989  
and the Falkenseer  
Chaussee ends  
suddenly in concrete



# T H E M A K I N G O F ...



## I N T O T H E B R E A C H

How two developers learned the  
importance of picking your battles

BY ALEX SPENCER

Format PC, Switch  
Developer/publisher Subset Games  
Origin US  
Release 2018



Hold up *Into The Breach* alongside its peers – the likes of *XCOM*, *Phoenix Point* or *Mutant Year Zero* – and what stands out is the game's simplicity. Its tactical battles play out on an eight-by-eight square grid, adding up to a campaign that can be won or lost in the time it takes to complete a single mission of *XCOM*. At first glance, it might not seem like the kind of game that would take over four years to make. But *Into The Breach*'s simplicity was hard-won – not least because, for most of the development process, its scope was much wider.

In 2014, the two-man team of **Justin Ma** and **Matthew Davis**, collectively known as Subset Games, were still recovering from the unexpected popularity of their debut game, *FTL*, which had gone from experimental project to early Kickstarter success story to IGF winner in the space of 18 months. "In retrospect, it came together at a blistering speed," Ma says. "The core game idea was kind of in place in like two or three months."

That success and speed, however, came at a cost. "Coming off *FTL*, we were both pretty burnt out," Davis says. "We weren't really in a hurry to do anything new, which is why we did *Advanced Edition* at a more casual pace after finishing *FTL*. And even after that, it was still a good four or five months before we started anything new." The pair weren't sure they even would make another game. "We had to feel like we could cancel it at any time," Ma says. "If Matt decided he hated working on games, then we could just step away." This was part of an effort to recreate the happy-accident design space of *FTL*, while also trying to create a more comfortable development cycle than the 18 months they'd just endured.

Eventually, Davis landed on an idea that seemed worth pursuing: a tactics game, inspired by the many hours both developers had poured into Firaxis' *XCOM* reboot, but also by mini-Roguelikes *Hoplite* and *Desktop Dungeons*. "No randomness; interesting meaty design that's really elegant and clean – I thought it'd be really interesting to try and make something like that," Davis says. "I didn't realise just how hard it was going to be."

As his idea started to take shape, Davis drew further inspiration from an unexpected



One challenge was showing who was shooting where. "Half of the work on the entire game was on the UI," Ma says

source: 2013 Superman movie *Man Of Steel*, infamous for a final battle where its hero demonstrated a troubling lack of regard for human life. "Entire cities would be destroyed, and it's just background noise, and no one really seems to care that a few hundred thousand people probably just died," Ma says. "Matt wanted to make a game where protecting the city was the highest priority, where you're willing to sacrifice yourself to save the city. That

"WE DISCUSSED DROPPING IT ENTIRELY. I DON'T KNOW IF WE WERE CLOSE TO PULLING THAT TRIGGER."

was the core design pillar. Although it doesn't say much about the gameplay, it's a feeling that we wanted to evoke for players, and we used that to guide the design."

This feeling helped Subset land on the game's theme – mechs versus kaiju seemed like the most obvious fictional example – and its broader design, such as the idea of telegraphed attacks. Each kaiju shows what it's going to attack next turn, giving the player chance to counteract it. "That was a kind of fumbling discovery that we had relatively early on," Ma says. "It would be a long time before we decided to focus on that as an actual design pillar, but we noticed that it was interesting – a design space I hadn't really seen

explored." It created a combat system where everything was perfectly predictable, without the dice rolls of *XCOM* – or indeed *FTL*, which had been criticised for its randomness.

As the turn-based combat started to come together, there was still the question of the other half: the strategy layer that would link each battle and, hopefully, give players a reason to care about the buildings they were protecting. "We fell into the trap that I think a lot of games fall into," Ma says. "It's really hard to make, basically, two games at once. Two games that can stand on their own and yet also complement each other."

**Subset worked through** multiple prototypes, often borrowing from boardgames the pair were playing at the time. One version of the game was influenced by *Pandemic*, with Vek infection spreading between nodes on a map. Another was more akin to worker placement games such as *Agricola*. The focus was tightened down to a single city for the player to manage. "Over time that gradually kept shrinking, to be smaller and smaller. For a while there was just a single city where you have four battle maps," Ma says. "We spent a year on this prototype, where you repaired buildings over time and you'd choose when to engage with threats as they appeared."

Asked what the problem was with each prototype, Davis' answer is always some variant on the same phrase: "Ultimately, it just wasn't fun." As the self-described pessimist of the duo, Davis would always be the first to acknowledge something wasn't working, but every time Ma agreed with his assessment. And so the pair scrapped months of work, over and over again. "We would try something and then it would fail, and we would try something else and we'd fail," Ma says. Where the core of *FTL* had come together in a couple of months, it took Subset two-and-a-half years to even figure out what this new game would be.

The promise the pair had made to one another in the early days of development – that they could always just step away from the project – looked increasingly tempting. "We often discussed dropping it entirely," Ma says. "I don't know if we were close to pulling that trigger. But it was definitely on the table." ►



## THE MAKING OF...

So what stopped them from canning the project entirely? "Maybe a bit of a sunk-cost fallacy," Ma admits. But there was also a sense that this strategy game idea, nebulous as it still was, had something special about it. "I think if one of us had an idea that sounded better and more doable, we probably would have dropped it. But neither of us did. We had lots of dumb small ideas, but nothing that was so obviously clear."

Around this point, the pair did briefly step away from *Into The Breach* to explore one of these side ideas. They tried prototyping an endless runner game instead, "just to explore some new mechanics and have some fun", Ma says. "That was harder than we expected, and maybe it pushed me back into thinking, 'all right, let's just finish this thing that I feel like we can do'. That was a bit of an impetus to try harder and actually finish it."

They returned to *Into The Breach* with a new philosophy, one that Ma neatly summarises as: "Screw it". Or, as Davis puts it: "We cut out all the crap that didn't work." Everything which wasn't working – which wasn't fun – was immediately tossed out. The strategy layer was jettisoned entirely. Instead, players would simply pick their next mission from a list of three. This put the focus entirely on the one aspect which was working: combat.

Between bouts of wrestling with the strategy layer, Subset had also been working on the game's other half, and combat had developed nicely from that early concept of telegraphed attacks. There were still issues to be ironed out, especially when it came to UI. ("So many times, we put the game in front of a playtester and asked them, 'What's going to happen?' before they click shoot," Davis says. "And they would get it wrong. Every single time.") But as every ounce of fat was trimmed away – no more management of cities or multiple squads, no more cannon-fodder support units, no more passive abilities – they finally had a core loop that felt polished, unique and, ultimately, fun.

"Frankly, if we made that decision earlier, we would have saved years of effort," Ma says. And the pair had no qualms about going back to the drawing board and erasing past work, he says: "As long as the game that you have left is good enough, it feels wonderful to just cut away at everything."

### Q&A

**Matthew Davis**  
Co-founder, Subset Games



**Unlike a lot of tactics games, *Into the Breach* doesn't have hit percentages – why did you move away from that element of random chance?**

That was really early on. It came from those early inspirations of *Desktop Dungeons* and *Hoplite*. They weren't doing dice rolls, and it created these puzzle-like experiences. We're not opposed to die rolls, but we thought it'd be interesting to try and make a game that didn't have them.

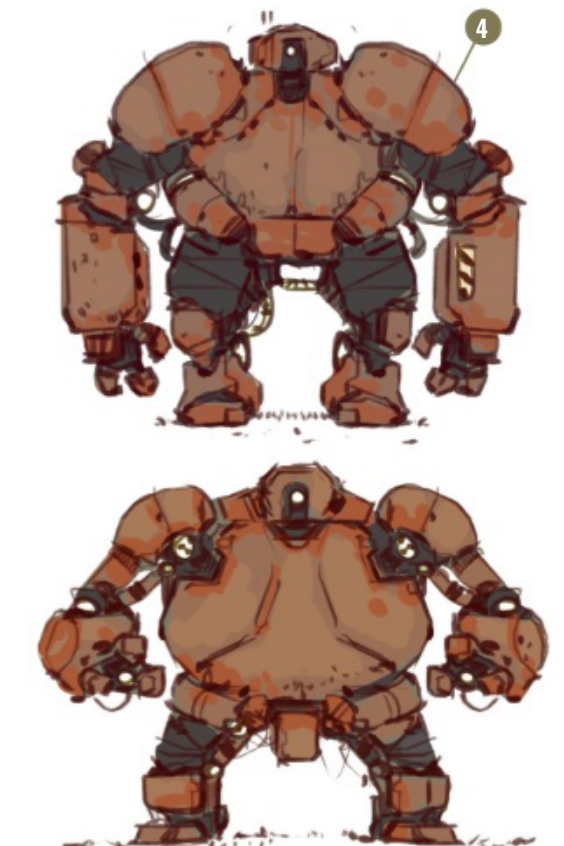
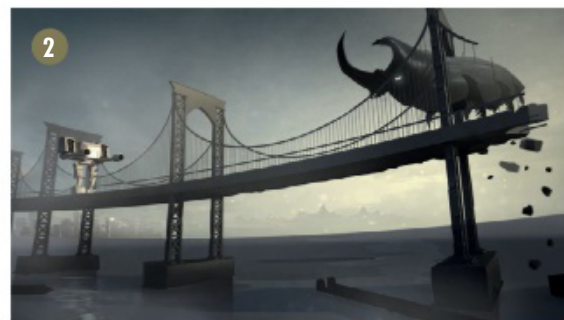
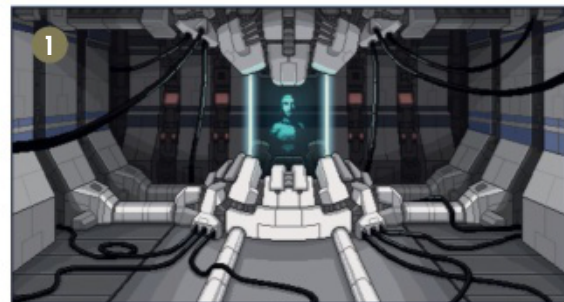
**There is one exception to this rule, though – buildings have a small chance of surviving an attack. Where did that come from?**

It was an important part of the game. There's only one reason it's in there – because there were situations where you were going to lose and there's nothing you could do to stop it. And we didn't want the player to hit 'end turn' and lose. I wanted the player to always have a chance, no matter what the odds were against them, something might happen. And so when they end the turn, they get to sit there and hope.

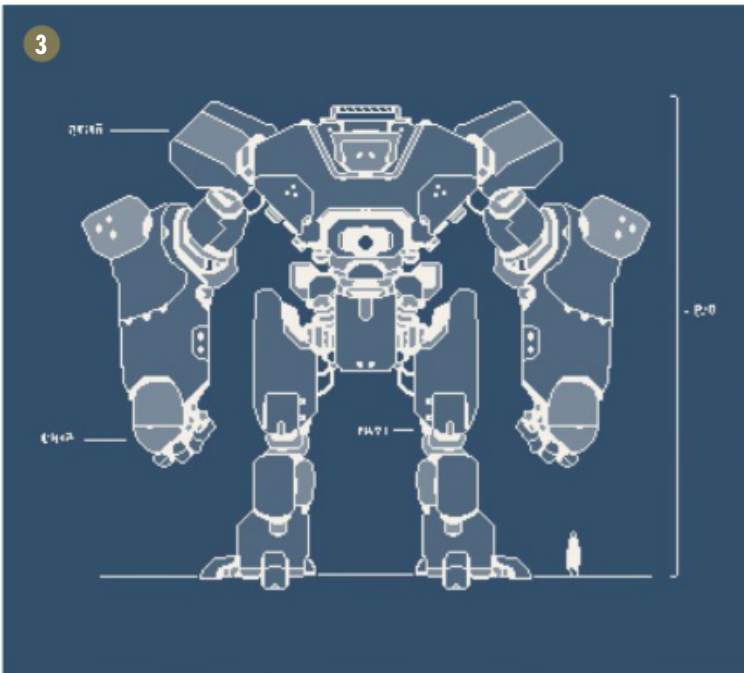
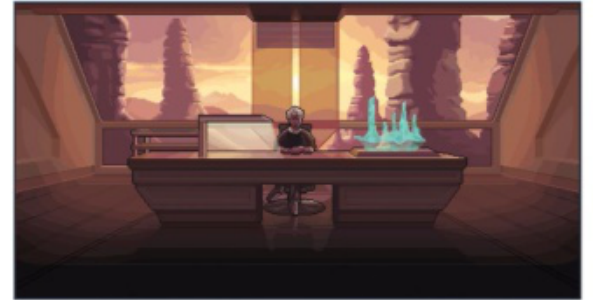
**For the most part, though, you manage to avoid unsolvable puzzles – how do you design the maps to support that?**

A lot of people think the maps are procedurally generated, which is really interesting. I think that lends credence to my philosophy of doing the absolute simplest solution. We could have spent a really long time designing a procedural system to create maps. But these are very small maps, they're very easy to make – we have a little map editor, and you can make one in two minutes. And so it was a lot easier to just make 200 maps by hand that weren't going to cause problems or break the game in any way, rather than spend years iterating on a procedural map-generation process.

From this smaller base, Ma and Davis were able to build outwards. This, they both agree, is how Subset does its best work. "We made something as small as we could possibly make it, and then we just kind of tacked on the features that we thought were absolutely necessary for the rest of the game," Davis says. They added small pieces to the design, ready to drop anything that wasn't perfect, or at ►





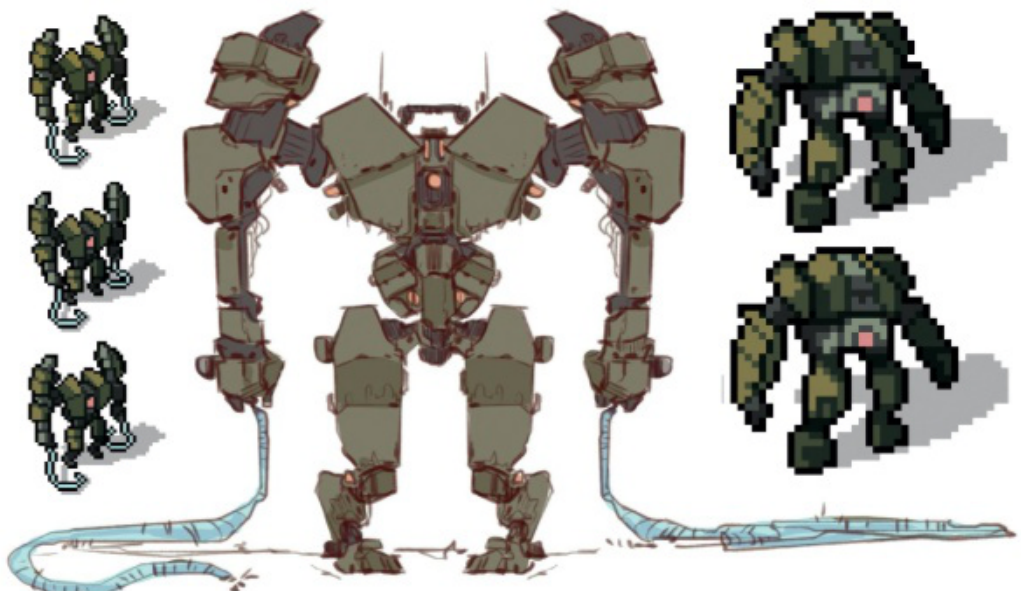
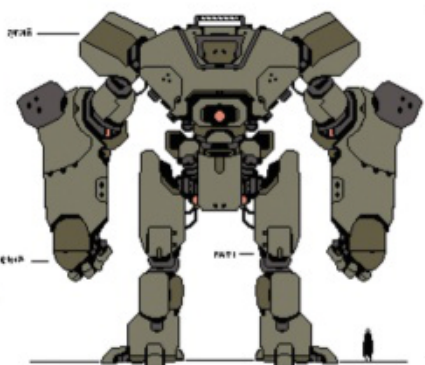
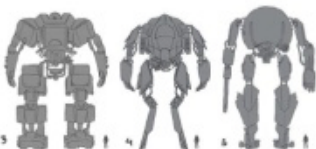
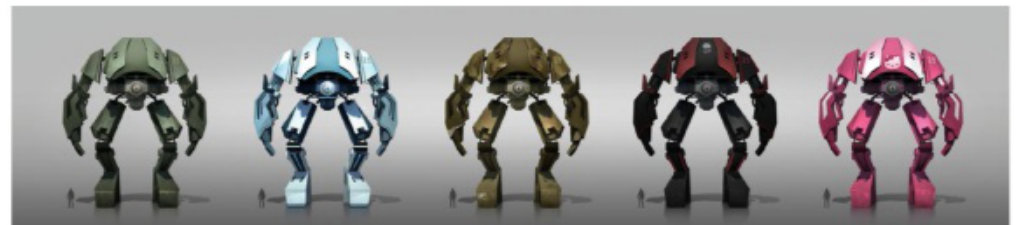
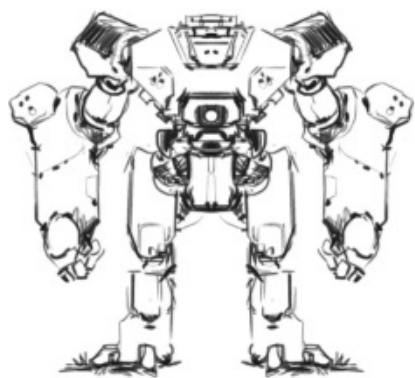


1 Each island is operated by a different company and CEO. The planned number of islands was slashed late in development, because the mechanical variations that each brought to combat “started to buckle under their own weight,” Davis says.

2 Early location and character concepts by Nina Limarev, the first of three artists to assist Subset Games’ work on *Into The Breach*.

3 This mech schematic served as the album cover for the game’s soundtrack by Ben Prunty, who handled music for *FTL*. “He just absolutely killed it,” Ma says.

4 Concept artist Gareth Davies – hired on the strength of the “crap-ton of awesome mechs” displayed on his Twitter feed – helped to flesh out unit designs later in development, as Ma started to run out of variations on the towering-robot theme





## THE MAKING OF...

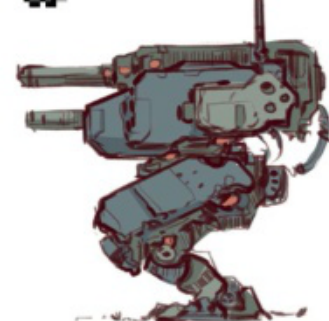
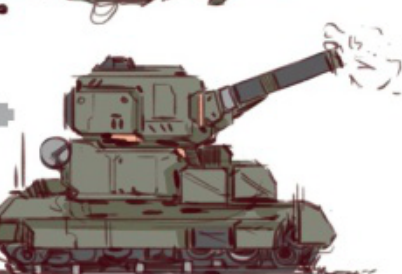
least up to the pair's exacting standards. A planned six-island structure, each with unique mechanics that changed the nature of battle, was cut back to four. Upgrade trees were trimmed. Special buildings, which would provide players with a buff, were demolished.

"A lot of things, it felt like we were trying to design something interesting and new, with different theming – and in the end, the solutions that existed previously in every other game ever just worked better," Ma says. "There's no reason to have the complicated systems that we had. So we just said, 'Well, screw it, just do what everybody always does'. And, frankly, it's better."

As Subset pushed *Into The Breach* to the end of its four-year development, Ma says, "we just kept simplifying it and simplifying it". The result is something small but perfectly formed: a crisp eight-by-eight grid, as readable as a chess board, where each round of combat feels like its own handmade puzzle.

Not that its makers necessarily see it that way. "The game gets complimented and criticised for its simplicity," Davis says. "A lot of people think there's not enough content; you see too much of it all in the first couple runs, and there needs to be more to it. While other people see it as really tight and compact, and you shouldn't do more to it because that would break that core feature. And I kind of agree with both sides."

Now, 18 months on from release – as long as it took to make the entirety of *FTL* – the pair find themselves back in the liminal period between games and trying to apply the lessons they've learned from their first two projects. "I would say that *Into The Breach*'s development was definitely more healthy than *FTL*'s, in part because we had the funds to take our time," Ma says. "I don't want to take that for granted." Without that freedom, Ma and Davis might never have been able to finish *Into The Breach* to their satisfaction – but there's a price to taking your time on a single project, just as there is to rushing ahead. "The perfectionism that went into this game, I think, is unsustainable. Some of this stuff is just who we are, and the types of things that we enjoy making. But identifying aspects that aren't good for our psyche, and aren't good for us as developers, is probably critical." The solution, alas, is unlikely to be simple. ■



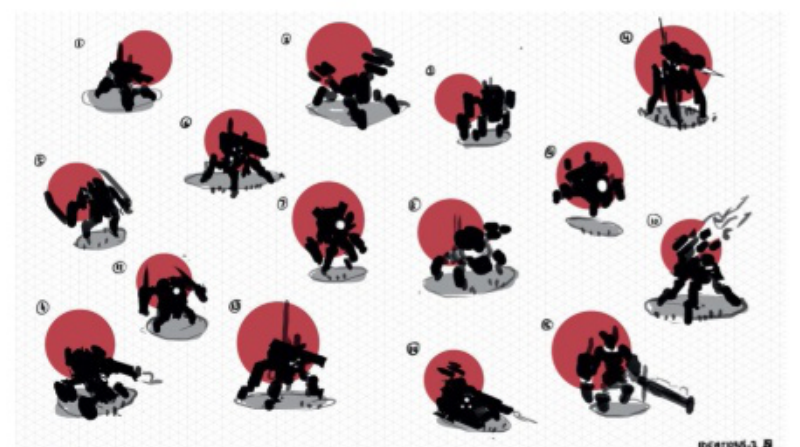
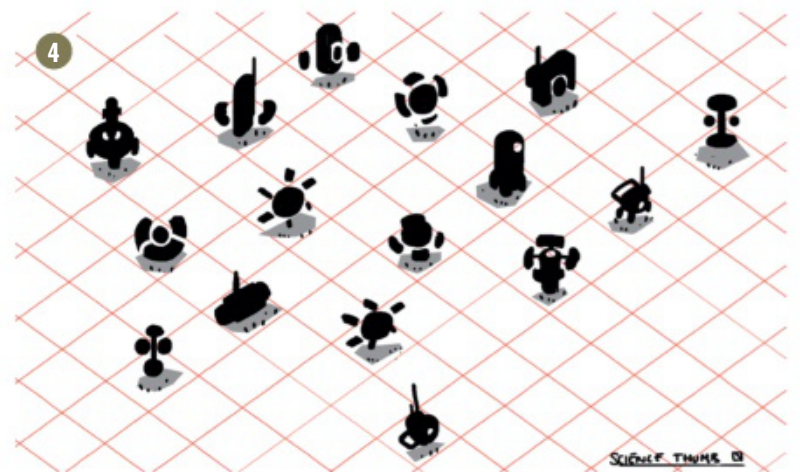
1 The game never foregrounds its plot elements, but each pilot has a complex backstory crafted by RPG legend Chris Avellone, which can be glimpsed in occasional one-liners during combat.

2 Support units such as jets and tanks were originally planned to be a much bigger part of the game, serving as cannon fodder in combat – another idea deemed unnecessarily complex and cut.

3 There are just over a dozen enemy models in the game, with tougher 'Alpha' and boss variants identified with a colour-swap.

4 "The most important thing was to see everything at a glance and understand what was going on," says Ma. "Our eyes are better at recognising silhouettes than anything else." The aim was to make each unit as immediately distinct as a chess piece







**STUDIO PROFILE**

# THE CHINESE ROOM

On the long, transformative walk from research team to videogame studio

By JEN SIMPKINS





The Chinese Room's Brighton office, with its corridor of frosted glass and rooms of filing cabinets and phones, looks more like the setting for a '70s cop show than a game studio. Before it moved in, this was the building for the local branch of Unison, the public service union. It still very much feels like it: most of its rooms are unoccupied, canvases of concept art propped up against the skirting boards still waiting to be hung. Down the hallway is the main workspace, an open-plan room filled with busy desks.

It's a haphazard arrangement. (Suspiciously so, in fact: we're told the previous landlord was convinced some kind of gambling outfit was being operated in here.) But it suits The Chinese Room somewhat. "We became a game studio kind of accidentally," co-founder **Dan Pinchbeck** says. He'd been working in the University Of Portsmouth's creative technologies department on a doctorate on the uses of story and non-technological elements to enhance presence in virtual reality. "I was playing *TimeSplitters* one night, and I went, 'Wait – this is massmarket virtual reality!'" he laughs. "Why am I doing VR when I could be doing games?" He switched the subject of his PhD to how story should be considered a mechanic. "I talked to a few people and they were like, 'This is just theory'." He and a few others began modding *Doom* and *Half-Life 2* in an effort to gather data. They made a version of *Doom 3* with rubber bullets to see how stunning enemies instead of killing them changed the gameplay ("You'd end up with 100 zombies following you around a level").

*Dear Esther*, The Chinese Room's seminal 'walking simulator', was one such experiment. "It was just, if we got some of my favourite points of stuff like *System Shock* and even *Doom*, those powerful quieter moments when it's just you alone with your thoughts and feelings – would that work if that was all there was?" He asked Jessica Curry, his long-time collaborator (and wife) to compose the score for a *Half-Life 2* mod, found a voice actor in Nigel Carrington and the help of a few keen students, put it together and uploaded it to ModDB. "We thought maybe 100 people would download it and write emails to us telling us how shit it was, but at least we'd have data. And it went in completely the opposite direction."

These were the first seeds of *Dear Esther*. It won an award at IndieCade, which then hired their musicians and funded their engine licence. *Dear Esther* launched on Steam in 2012. "We didn't really expect anything of it," Pinchbeck



While most of the team is working on *Little Orpheus*, the rest have started prototyping The Chinese Room's next game

says. "And then Jess and I were sat in bed at three in the morning watching it going, 'Oh, oh!'" Six hours and a quarter of a million units later, they'd paid off their investment.

It was a success that would alter the course of their lives; at the time, it changed little. Indeed, the studio, if you could call it that – "We were all working for the University Of Portsmouth," Pinchbeck explains, "so actually, The Chinese Room wasn't anything other than just a name we

## "WE LEARNED HOW TO BE A STUDIO DURING THE PRODUCTION OF EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE"

stuck on the top of *Dear Esther*" – had already been in talks with the people at Frictional Games, who were fans of their *Half-Life 2* horror mod *Korsokovia*, about creating DLC for horror hit *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. It was supposed to be an hour-and-a-half affair, but morphed into a full, story-led sequel, *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*, and was even marketed through an alternate-reality game on Frictional's website. The Chinese Room was becoming a name.

It wasn't a traditional development cycle by any means: Pinchbeck and team worked on the game for about 18 months, before Frictional took it back for the final six or seven. "It was really odd," he tells us, "and tense, because there were discussions about stuff we had done that they didn't like, and ultimately it was their game. But suddenly it was very much *our* game when it came out. We didn't have it for the last six months! Not that I would attempt to pass off any responsibility for the stuff that didn't work." They'd officially made enough of an impression to be considered culpable. It was clear that The



The Chinese Room

**Founded** 2007

**Employees** 32

**Key staff** Dan Pinchbeck (co-founder), Jessica Curry (co-founder), Ed Daly (studio director)

**URL** [www.thechineseroom.co.uk](http://www.thechineseroom.co.uk)

**Selected softography** *Dear Esther*, *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*, *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, *So Let Us Melt*

**Current projects** *Little Orpheus*, TBA

Chinese Room was here to stay. "The way Jess and I used to talk about it was, we sort of just made *Dear Esther*, a mod team made *Pigs* – and then we learned how to be a studio during the production of *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*."

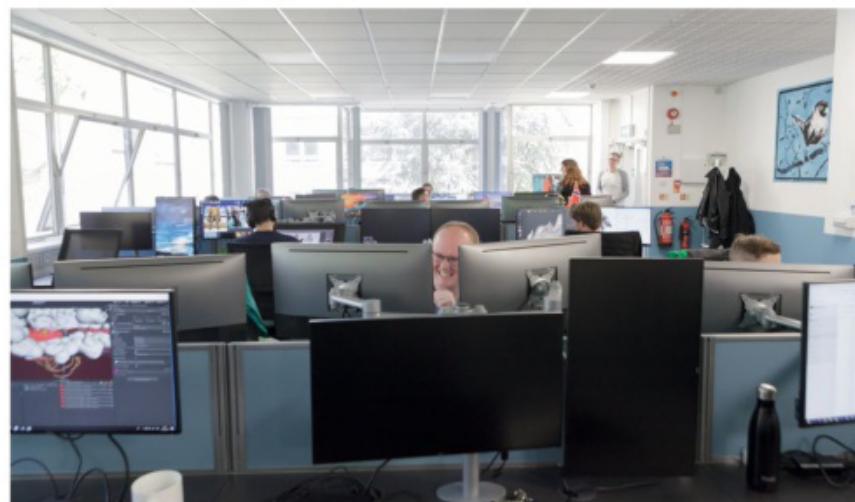
**They learned the** hard way. The university's arts and humanities council, still keen to support practical development as research, had funded *Esther* – which The Chinese Room ended up holding the IP for, due to the university's duty-of-care clauses making it incompatible with distribution agreements. "We were like, 'This is stuff universities need to know'," Pinchbeck says. "So what if you give us enough money to

build a prototype, and we deliberately try to run through every single hurdle and document it?" The idea was to potentially prove with a saleable game that university research units could incubate riskier commercial products. "I dunno, I was just kind of going, 'Eh, give us some money'." They got it. "So we finished *Pigs* on the Friday, and started *Rapture* on Monday morning."

This was equally due to excitement and insecurity. "I was still working on the basis that at any point there's going to be a knock on the door, and it'd be the game industry saying, 'You're a fraud, you can leave now, you don't know what you're doing'." But there was plenty of interest: Sony Santa Monica (many of whom now form the core team of Annapurna Interactive) met with them, and suddenly their walking sim set in a rural English village was on a prototyping agreement with Sony. "I look back on the materials that we sent to them and I'm kind of gobsmacked they signed it," Pinchbeck says. "But *Journey* had just come out, they'd just taken on Giant Sparrow for *Unfinished Swan*, PS4 ►



## STUDIO PROFILE



For Pinchbeck, becoming a multiproject studio is the first step towards greater security and creative freedom. "I've got this one concept that would be triple-A scale," he says. "I think we could do it, but we need to slowly build up the studio to prove what we can do"

was coming out. The remit was, 'We're going to blow Microsoft out of the water because we'll have every single exciting experiment – what's going on Steam, we want on PlayStation'. So they were signing stuff in a very risk-taking way."

The Chinese Room finally constituted as a company of 15 employees, Pinchbeck and Curry figuring out how to run a commercial studio from a flat conversion filled with damp and bees. "It was weird," Pinchbeck says. "As a couple, we're quite cautious. But there was a fair bit of press around at the time like, 'Who do they think they are, coming into the industry and telling us?' And we were like, 'We've never done that at all!' We were quite careful – we'd only made one game, and *Esther* was in the right place at the right time, and you have to retain a degree of humility about that. It felt like a bit of a fluke."

But with Santa Monica on side, and more specialist hires, both studio and game began to take shape. They learned how to calculate production milestones, with Curry proving a particularly acute business mind and Pinchbeck playing the role of "charging around the studio with a flag going 'Follow me, we can do this, trust me!'" Their naivety gave them an alternative perspective on traditional practices, which was both help and hindrance: they rebuilt *Rapture's* village five times, once just seven months out from going gold. They were treading new ground with an open-world walking sim, and figuring it out as they went made being efficient impossible. They were also outsiders in the British game industry, bunkered down in an intense dev cycle with nobody to call for a gut-check.

*Rapture* released in 2015, and the studio moved into the Unison building. But just two years later, following a stressful period in which they struggled to find funding for Google Daydream VR title *So Let Us Melt*, things fell apart. "We were saying 'We're going to be

okay' to the team, increasingly feeling like we were lying to them," Pinchbeck says. "I wasn't able to give the game the attention it needed, and the team were adrift without a leader for large chunks of it." Conversations revolved around finance and planning. "Even as a couple, we're talking about the company all the time – and not about the games. And this is not what we signed up for. It's like there was a cliff edge getting closer every day. But what I'm weirdly proud of is before we went over the cliff edge, we went, 'Right. If we make a really, really tough decision now, we stand a chance of surviving'."

In July, all eight of the current staff were laid off, and studio operations "suspended". The

studio together and making sure we didn't run out of money. It's the ability to excite people and get them to invest that seems harder." Pinchbeck laughs: "That's the fun bit for me!" With Sumo's support on basic things such as refurbishing the offices, nowadays The Chinese Room is once again in a position to do what it does best.

**Its latest project**, *Little Orpheus*, is a side-scrolling, episodic mobile adventure starring a hapless astronaut with a penchant for bending the truth: think *Playdead*, only lighter and cheekier. Its second, unannounced project is something entirely different. "It's the opportunity for me to make the type of game I've wanted to

**"YOU CAN FEEL THE FINGERPRINT OF THE STUDIO... I HOPE IT COMES THROUGH THAT WE'RE QUITE CREATIVELY RESTLESS"**

founders moved home, and took six months off to recover. Pinchbeck wrote a novel. He considered whether he still wanted to work in games. "I was so burnt out," he says, "but I was able to sit there and go, 'No, this is what I want to do with my life. There's no alternative'."

In December, Sumo Digital (newly on the stock market) suggested an acquisition. Curry decided she would not return to the running of the studio. Pinchbeck needed a studio director. "I'm going from running a business with my wife to working with someone I've never worked with before, so the personalities have to work."

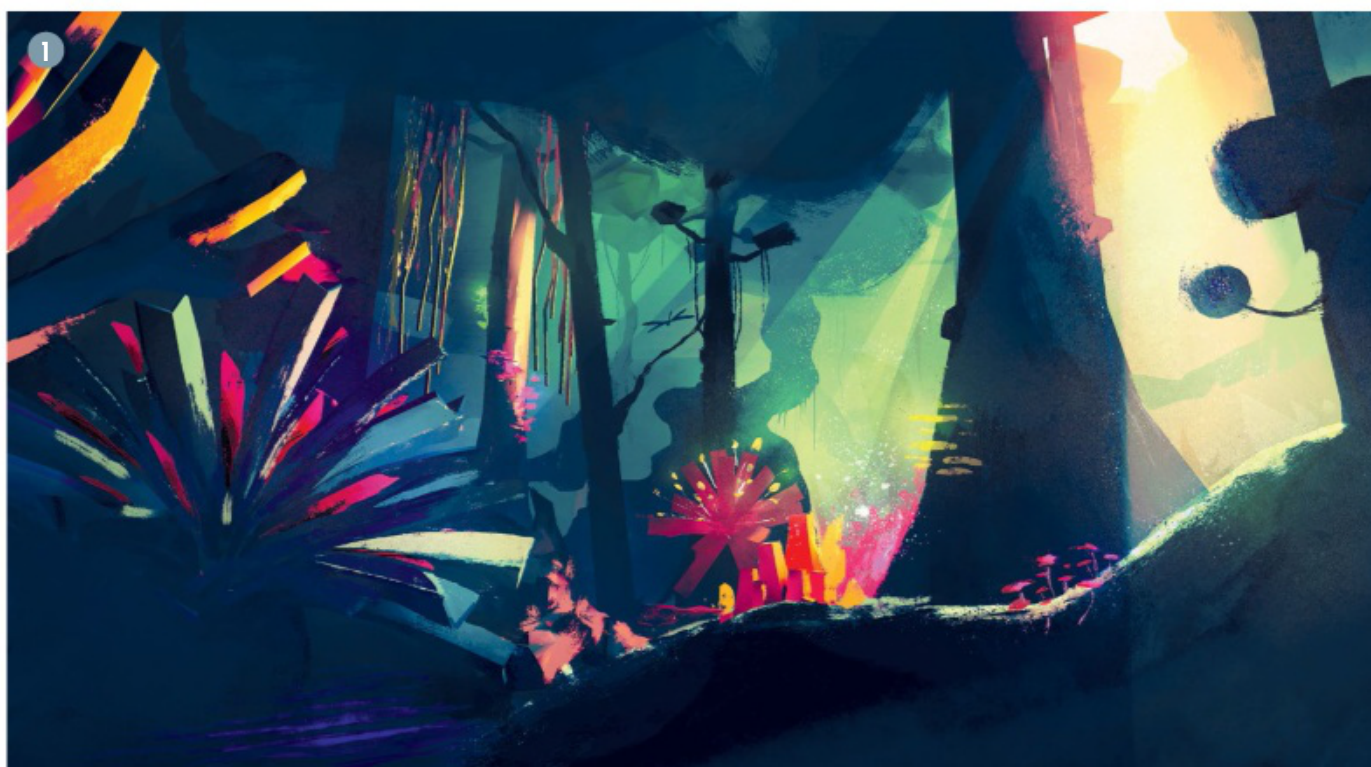
Fortunately, he met **Ed Daly**. "Dan had clear ideas about what games he wanted to make," Daly says, "but some trepidation about delivering on them, having been through the mill to some extent. But to me, the easy bit was putting the

make for several years," Pinchbeck smiles.

"*Dear Esther* was a fairly mechanically traditional game, but we put our spin on it," he continues. "Like with *Arkane*, when people turn our games on, even if it's a version of *Tetris*, I want them to go 'Oh, that's The Chinese Room *Tetris*.' You can feel that fingerprint of the studio. I don't want to be known as a studio that makes a particular type of game. I hope that it comes through that we're quite creatively restless."

More generally, The Chinese Room is finally starting to settle: the canvases of concept art are one sign, and when we first arrive, several team members are decorating a wall with a giant studio logo. It might be an odd place to call home, but if the studio has proved anything so far, it's that it can work grand transformations in the most unexpected of places. ■





1 So *Let Us Melt* marked the studio's most turbulent point. "We went, 'Either we finish this game, and spare the team two months of work on a game knowing they've lost their jobs', which was horrible," Pinchbeck says. "'Or tell them now so they have two months to find jobs', which felt slightly less horrible."  
 2 *Mirror's Edge* artist Rob Briscoe was behind *Dear Esther*'s 2012 visual revamp.  
 3 With *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*, the studio showed story could trump AI to create horror.  
 4 Concept art for *Little Orpheus*. You play Ivan Ivanovic, who relays his far-fetched adventures to the intimidating interrogator in the fur coat





# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

### **Slay The Spire** Switch

In hindsight, the £50 we spent on *Dragon Quest Builders 2* for the flight to see this month's cover game was a bit of a waste. Mega Crit's deck-building Roguelike is a heck of a drug, and makes the long-haul hours simply race by. A little too quickly, if anything – airmiles upgrades don't come along that often in this line of work, after all.

### **Super Mario Maker 2** Switch

While the **Edge** brood continues its quest to overload the Switch's onboard RAM with as many flying Piranha Plants as can be squeezed into a screen, the grown-ups have been tearing their hair out at *Celeste* creator Matt Thorsen's levels. As you'd expect, they're brutally hard, yet always plausibly achievable. If only this had *Celeste*'s instant respawns, we'd be just fine. Probably.

### **Gitaroo Man** PS2

We know we're meant to frown on emulation, but look – if no one's going to remaster Inis' peerless rhythm game, needs must. Besides, it is summer, and the loft belongs to the spiders. Sadly, even with a new GPU, the game appears emulation-proof: the already nails-hard shark section is rendered impossible by geometry glitches. Remaster now, or we riot.

## REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

### **106 Wolfenstein: Youngblood**

PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

### **110 Fire Emblem: Three Houses**

Switch

### **114 Dragon Quest Builders 2**

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PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

### **122 Fantasy Strike**

PC, PS4, Switch



Explore the iPad  
edition of **Edge** for  
extra Play content



# Do the right thing

Choice paralysis – where you are faced with so many options, and so afraid of picking the wrong one, that you end up making no decision at all – is thankfully a rare sight in videogames. Developers tend to ensure we have all the information we need before they ask us to commit to something. Yet *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (p110) comes perilously close to it. The game has barely begun when we are asked to choose over which of the trio of titular school houses we'd like to preside. We're not sure we like any of them, and at least two seem quietly racist. We'll be stuck with whichever one we choose for the next 50 hours or more. We almost give up there and then.

Thankfully, we persevere, and *Three Houses* turns into a game about helping our young charges become the best they can be, which is of course irresistible. It is a game about family – and is it just us, or are those becoming steadily more commonplace? Perhaps we're all just getting on a bit; either way, what was once the preserve of party-based JRPGs is spreading ever wider.

Elsewhere, *Wolfenstein: Youngblood* (p106) recasts BJ Blazkowicz as the damsel, with his daughters playing the role of his saviour. *Sky: Children Of The Light* (p116), Thatgamecompany's latest ethereal adventure, is about the power of a close-knit collective – one that can reach greater heights by looking out for one another, holding hands tight.

We did not expect that theme to continue in *Dragon Quest Builders 2* (p114); we were braced for the choice paralysis often found in *Minecraft*, its chief inspiration. Yet keeping our band of merry outcasts fed, watered, warm and with sufficiently well-appointed toilet facilities provokes a pleasant parental buzz. The little darlings even put themselves to bed when they're tired. More of this, please.





# Wolfenstein: Youngblood

Zofia and her sister teeter on the edge of a burning zeppelin, the scene of their first Nazi assassination and five minutes of subsequent cheering, vomiting and picking brains from each other's hair. "Jump!" says Zofia. "Can we make it?" asks Jessie. Zofia throws herself backward over it, yelling, "How the fuck should I know?"

This reckless leap into the unknown perfectly captures the spirit of the Terror Twins, protagonists of *Youngblood*. They're freewheeling renegades, giddy with the excitement of finally getting to follow in their daddy's footsteps and shoot them some Third Reich. Their incidental dialogue says so much about their relationship – not to mention their unusual upbringing by a renowned Nazi hunter – without ever feeling like flagrant exposition, and their exuberance motors the game along. The tone of their exchanges couldn't be further removed from BJ's whispered monologues in *The New Colossus*, and they own that departure. 'Jes' and 'Soph' Blazkowicz are *Youngblood*'s strongest asset, whether they're taking down Supersoldaten on the streets of occupied Paris, playfighting in elevator rides or leaping from exploding blimps.

*Youngblood* springs free of *The New Colossus*' linear singleplayer formula in favour of something entirely separate: a co-op loot game. And not just that, but a co-op loot game developed in collaboration with Arkane Studios – master of the cunning alternate path, artisan of incidentally placed bric-a-brac that tells you more about the game world than any NPC could – set in an alt-history 1980s Nazi-ruled Paris, with an all-female leading cast. Needless to say, this is a very much a roll of the dice for the two studios.

You are, at least, eased into this new vision of *Wolfenstein*. The opening airship level was designed by MachineGames itself, and you get a sense of that immediately. It's a sequence of spacious layouts, each more implausibly well-suited to gunfights than the last, taking you from industrial back rooms to casino floors with robotic croupiers and red-curtained Third Reich opulence. Here, you need only devote one per cent of your brainpower to the new. There's someone else on your side, and she occasionally boosts your health or you hers. Thumbs-ups are exchanged. Switches now come in twos and require synchronised operation. Yes, there's a boss fight with a general who can turn invisible and heal himself. Yes, those are the cheapest tricks in the boss-battle book. But otherwise this is the flowing, cathartic shooting you remember. The health bars do seem more robust. But you'll just whack the difficulty down if it gets a bit much later on, won't you?

And then the game begins in earnest. Missions take place across a series of hub areas within Paris which you move between via a map of the city's Metro network. Deep in the catacombs where La Résistance has set up

**Developer** MachineGames, Arkane Studios  
**Publisher** Bethesda  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

It's like fighting for your life in a pop-up storybook filled with swastikas

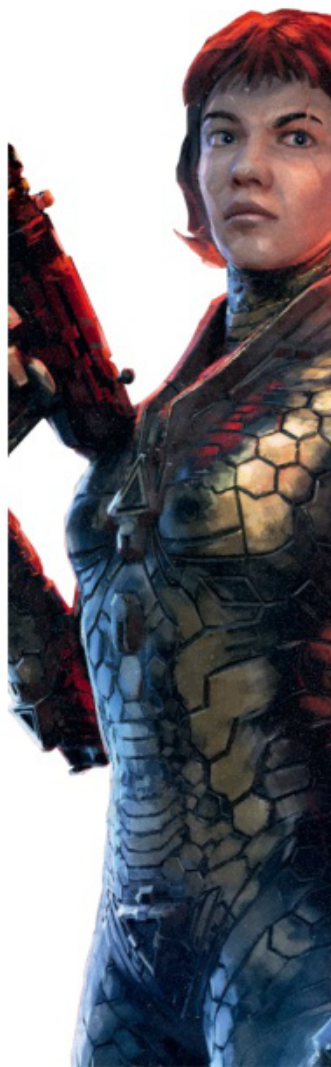
base camp, your comrades dole out missions whose objectives lie across those hub areas. Venture out, tick off objective, return for XP payout. Repeat to fade.

And every time you step out of the catacombs, you face a barrage, not just of Nazi supersoldiers and their accompanying mechanised horrors, but of questing and grinding, picking up silver coins every five paces and almost spending them on an in-game hat before snapping out of your stupor. You'll retread the same handful of hub-levels to complete side missions until you're sufficiently high-level to complete story missions (which feel broadly like the side missions) in those same areas, and drop the difficulty level much earlier than you thought you'd have to, yet get vaporised anyway. You face Laserhunds with eight health bars, and chase map markers that appear impossible to reach. It all feels a long way from that zeppelin.

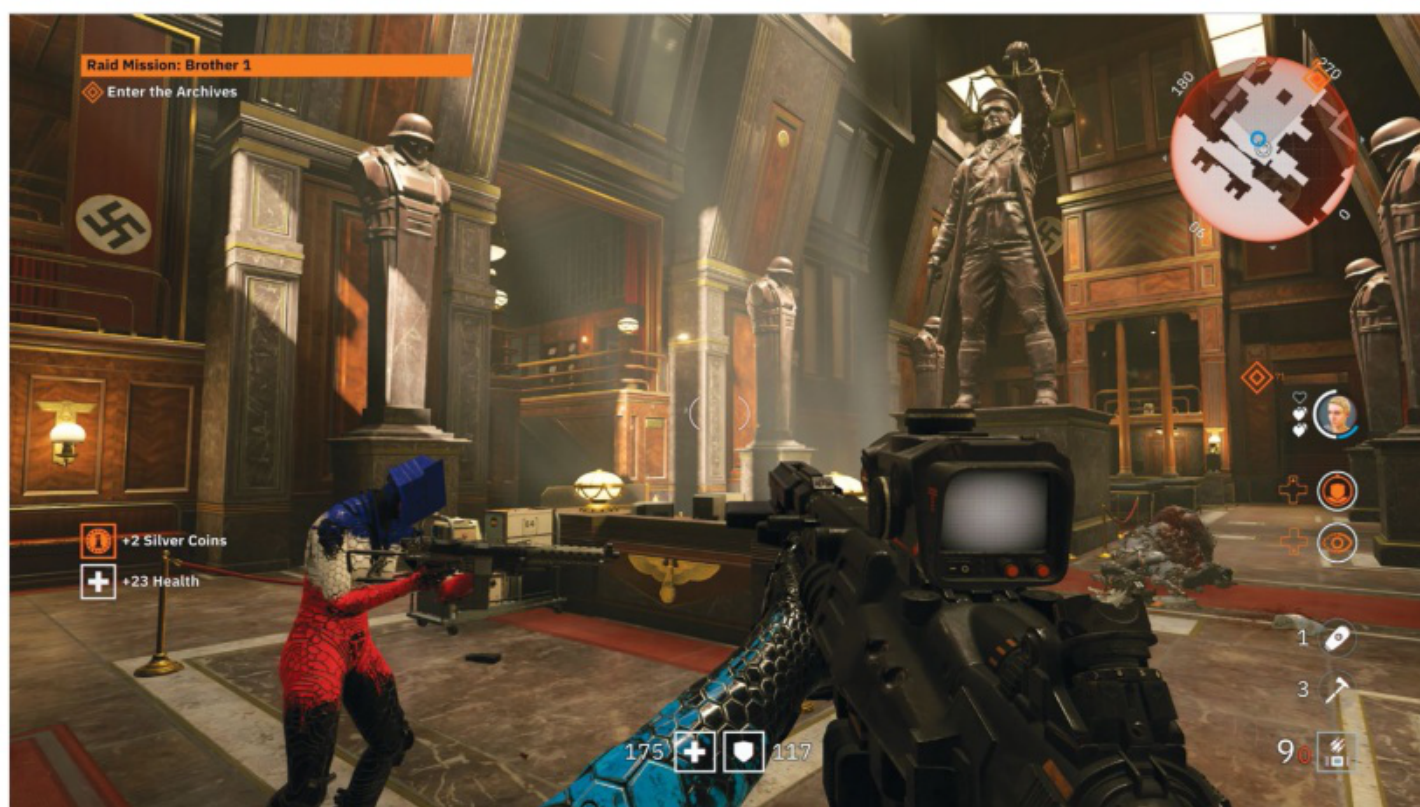
The reality of an Arkane-designed *Destiny* featuring '80s Nazis is that of disparate elements that can't knit together. Arkane's level design worked well in *Dishonored*, the sheer volume of clutter in every corner of every room gently encouraging you to slow down and smell the roses. Its eye for verticality and multiple routes rewarded patient level explorers and promoted stealth. Most importantly it blended perfectly with your powers, always setting you up with opportunities to pull off something that felt ingenious.

**That same unmistakably** Arkane level design informs the hub worlds of Paris – nine or so of them, many containing sub-levels. And they all have their own way of telling the story of living in this nightmare of fallen Paris. Brutalist Albert Speer angles break up the tenements where the Nazis have installed checkpoints, and black, pulsing screens of early computers sit among throngs of wires in intelligence rooms. What the design doesn't do is let you read or navigate levels easily, or fight efficiently within them. The absence of simple things – a full-size map, quest markers that give an indication of routes – too often makes traversal a chore, particularly given that this is a co-op game in which both players are free to roam wherever they like on the map, but which frequently demands they collaborate to open a door. The many hubs of Paris would be a fine setting for a stealth game, but going quiet in *Youngblood* will only ever get you about three enemies deep before a 20-person brawl breaks out. And when that happens, the angles never seem to line up quite right for a satisfying shootout. It's like fighting for your life in a pop-up storybook filled with swastikas.

All of which could be viewed much more charitably if *Youngblood* wasn't so punitive about its difficulty. Each mission indicates a recommended level when you select it from the HUD, and woe betide you if you attempt it before you reach that level. It's an exercise in ►

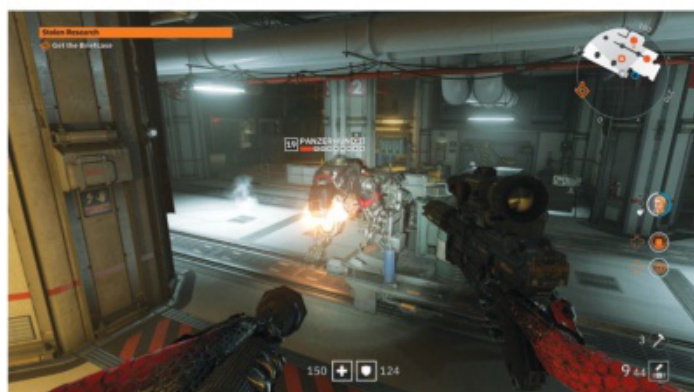




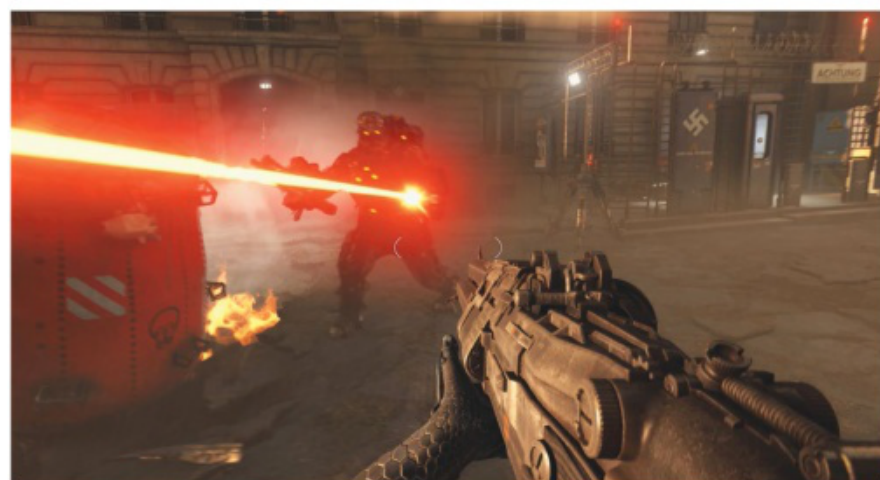


**ABOVE** What it lacks in effective camouflage, the tricolore Powersuit skin makes up for in bloody-minded Gallic patriotism. A Swedish flag option is also available, alongside a baffling array of greys and browns.

**LEFT** Weapon upgrades like this preposterous CRT screen of a scope have an enormous bearing on combat difficulty, but *Youngblood* doesn't tell you that in clear terms. It's something you learn in the field



**ABOVE** Meeting robotic enemies like this generally signals the end of any stealth run. With no means of taking them down silently, you're forced into either all-out assault mode or an ill-advised cloak run past them



**BELOW** Supersoldaten and their lasers present an easy opportunity for some co-op strategy: one player draws their slow-moving beam towards them while the other fires off headshots out of harm's way

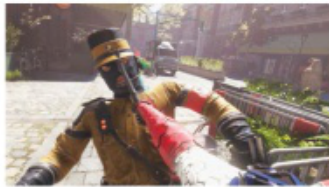




one-hit knockdowns from swarms of aerial drones and losing shared life after shared life (an otherwise neat co-op conceit) trying to revive each other in impossible chokepoints. This happens at every difficulty setting, and occasionally even when you're at the appropriate level for the task at hand. Familiar *Wolfenstein* enemies who are now endowed with layer upon layer of health bars simply aren't as enjoyable to fight as *Youngblood's* developers think they are, nor does the attritional combat they produce gel with the environments.

There are exceptions, of course. The raid missions, each a bombastic journey into the Brother districts where top SS officers run the city, have the advantage of taking place in bespoke environments. In the Brother One, Two and Three districts, you get the best sense of being swashbuckling sisters out to overthrow an insurmountable foe with sheerchutzpah, rather than jaded level-janitors sweeping each district clear of bullet sponges before handing your paybooks in for XP back at the catacombs. Here in the innards of the city, infrequent cutscenes are triggered and Soph and Jes can shine, bringing levity to the slaughter. It's just a shame you have to grind through so many forgettable missions to reach an adequate level before taking them on.

Still, *Youngblood* doesn't stumble at its most fundamental level: as a shared experience. PS4 servers have been robust throughout testing, the fledgling community generally good-natured, and the mechanics introduced in order to encourage collaborative play are as effective as they are simple. Best of all are 'peps', which temporarily buff the health or armour of both players on a cooldown timer. Smart deployment of peps makes all the difference in a tricky fight (so, every fight, then) and triggers an volley of empowering dialogue



#### ILL GOTTEN GAINS

Bethesda has taken some degree of flak for *Youngblood's* microtransaction model, which offers you the chance not just to pay real money for cosmetic items, but to hurry along progression by paying for weapon and character upgrades. If that alone isn't enough to rile the masses, several of those cosmetic items – suit skins and helmets – can *only* be obtained using gold bars, a currency which, unlike silver coins, can't be collected in-game and must instead be paid for. Perhaps those holding the proverbial pitchforks in response to these microtransactions would be relieved to know that none of Jes or Soph's Power Suit skins are especially appealing. Helmets offer a touch more personality but are only visible during combat, when you're busy shooting things.

The layouts of Paris' streets are recognisable, even under all the laser fire and symbols of hate. Quite why nobody has cleared away those burned-out cars in the 40 years since the war is anyone's guess, however

between the Terror Twins. All is right with *Youngblood* in these moments. Elsewhere are basic puzzle elements that require one player to stand at a keypad while another finds a decrypter and sends the correct code to them, or two switches to be flicked in sync. Hardly *Portal*, but satisfying in their own way.

Then it goes and forgets to make levelling up any fun. When the game first encourages you to choose a sister, along with a weapon, skill and pep you'll begin with, it infers this will be an exercise in specialisation as you progress. As the two sisters grow, you imagine, they'll go deeper into their specialities, and those radically different approaches will complement each other in inventive ways. Instead the skills within *Youngblood's* upgrade menus are a mixture of essential – increased health, armour, ammo capacity – and inconsequential. Charging into an enemy to stun them might save your hides a few times, but it won't inform the way you work together as a duo: skills don't run broad or deep enough to allow for that.

When *Wolfenstein: The Old Blood* arrived in 2015, it allowed MachineGames to throw around new narrative and conceptual ideas. The reputation of the main franchise would remain intact, however much of *The Old Blood* stuck or fell flat, and whatever worked might find its way into the next sequel. That's that sense here, too: an experiment which doesn't land on firm ground conceptually but finds something worthwhile in character-driven, collaborative play. The Terror Twins don't get the platform they deserve, but they put on quite a show with what they're given.



## Post Script

How MachineGames and Arkane imagine the '80s under the Nazis

**Y**oungblood is unusually shy about showing off its 1980s setting at a time when pop culture is absolutely transfixed by the period – not just the '80s, either, but a peculiar and imaginary version of the decade which never really took place, but is slowly eroding the more mundane reality as *Stranger Things* et al repaint the decade in their own image. For all the advantages of being set in an already established alternate history, MachineGames and Arkane's slant on the '80s adheres closely to that revisionist, synthwave-drenched version realised in *Far Cry: Blood Dragon*, *Black Mirror*'s San Junipero episode and – god rest its soul – *Radical Heights*.

Kudos must be apportioned to this game for resisting the urge to soak everything in magenta and cyan lighting, the laziest '80s shorthand in game design. Instead, you'll often find rooms teeming with analogue computer screens when you're out exploring, each encased in dull beige plastic, the rooms housing them ensconced in thick black cabling as though electricity back then was somehow more volatile and required that much more shielding.

At the climax of the Brother 1 raid, a Nazi supercomputer which most living rooms would struggle to contain is revealed. It's a giant triangle of sheer menace and pulsing red lights, nothing of its form giving any indication to its function. That's how people saw computers, once: great wedges of indistinguishable and unknowable technology.

Most effective of all these soft-touch period elements are the teeth-grinding synth-pop songs overheard on the radio during *Youngblood*'s opening level. It's not just the squelchy synthesisers or the sub-action movie soundtrack melodies that irritate, it's the fact these are *state-sanctioned* songs. In *Youngblood*'s horrifying vision of Nazi totalitarianism, this is the only music in existence. The likes of Madonna, Billy Joel and Queen simply never happened. As minor a point as it seems, it's those tiny infringements on your simplest freedoms that give you pause for thought. In a universe where the Third Reich won the war decades ago, this more mundane oppression would come to characterise the lives of Parisians. It's also a neat subversion of that feeling to find a *Wolfenstein 3D* arcade cabinet within the resistance headquarters in the Paris catacombs. It's a relic from a bygone era, yes, but it's also a startling liberty to be playing such a game right under the noses of the subject matter – not to mention incredibly meta.

Those overt touches of '80s culture sit alongside the same ornate bookcases and pompous busts found in many nooks and crannies of *The New Colossus*, and the effect feels curiously close to the *Dishonored* games:

old-world decadence alongside imaginary tech. The effect would be all the more engaging if it weren't so familiar. In the broader strokes of Paris' architecture, there's a lot of Corvo Attano's old haunt, Karnaca. *Dishonored 2*'s fictional city was itself inspired by southern Europe and its tenement blocks appear as though picked up and placed carefully down again here. The big difference here, of course, is that they're almost all draped in swastikas.

**Take a sightseeing** tour of *Youngblood*'s Paris and, in between frequent fights for your life, you'll find districts sectioned off by enormous dark grey steel walls. Checkpoints ruin the graceful architectural lines, and turrets impose themselves on otherwise friendly Gallic civic buildings. Joyless sans serif text distinguishes one district from another: 'KLEIN BERLIN' forces itself on a previously open, civilian neighbourhood. The Nazi occupation of the city almost looks like a physical infection, an alien body latching onto Paris and suffocating it.

Here, *Youngblood* seems to find a different source of inspiration for its alt-history '80s: East Berlin. Before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Germany's own capital was divided in broadly similar fashion to these Paris hub areas, and retrospective insights from the likes of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives Of Others* give a similar atmosphere to the one you feel when standing before one of those impossibly tall walls in *Youngblood*: an atmosphere of isolation and secrecy; the sense hundreds of people just out of view are watching and listening to your every move, and you could rise up and overthrow them, if only you knew where to aim. That's what makes the infiltrations into Paris' three Brother districts such a thrill. Not only are you going somewhere you're strictly, absolutely *verboten* to set foot and doing so right under the noses of your oppressors, but you're opening the enormous door on your way out, too. After each raid is completed, the Brother districts become easier to pop in and out of. There's a sense of gradually dismantling them.

Last and most on-the-nose of *Youngblood*'s '80s elements are its collectibles. These floppy disks, cassette tapes and 3D goggles are strewn across Paris as though left behind by particularly thoughtless and pop culture-loving Soldaten as they go gallivanting through the city. They don't say much about the game world, but they do say something about our tendency to fetishise dead tech. It would have been impossible to imagine back in the day, for example, that cheap storage disks or flimsy cardboard glasses which had very little bearing on day-to-day life would one day be used to succinctly capture a whole era. ■

A peculiar and imaginary version of the decade which never really took place, but is slowly eroding the reality





# Fire Emblem: Three Houses

**B**ernadetta von Varley was a shrinking violet when we arrived at Garreg Mach Monastery. Painfully introverted, she'd rather shut herself in her dorm room than socialise with her classmates. But look at her now. We're approaching the end of a hard-fought battle, and the enemy commander mockingly sneers at her as she nocks another arrow. Five seconds later, his breastplate pierced with laser precision, he falls from his horse and croaks his last. Our heart swells. Yes, we might have to do something about her apologising before every shot, but our star pupil has become our deadliest sniper. We honestly couldn't be prouder.

Transforming apparent no-hopers into one-hit-killers has always been one of the great pleasures of *Fire Emblem*. But in a series that's held nature and nurture in balance, *Three Houses* tips the scales towards the latter. Not for the first time, you're playing a silent hero of indeterminate age with a hidden past and a mysterious power – but those abilities come secondary to your role as a young professor teaching the art of war. You have a choice over which of the titular houses you'd like to preside, each representing a region within the kingdom of Fodlan. The Black Eagles and Blue Lions are rivals despite leaders Edelgard and Dimitri sharing an unusual connection, while the Golden Deer, led by the easygoing Claude, are basically Switzerland. *Three Houses'* story may have been inspired by 1996 entry *Genealogy Of The Holy War*, which never made it outside Japan, but you can understand the Hogwarts and *Persona* comparisons.

You may be on the other side of the classroom this time, but fans of Atlus's RPG series will recognise the agonising – call it Shin Megami Tension – over how to spend your free time. You can take your rest day literally, perking up tired pupils ahead of the following week's studies. Or you might arrange a seminar from a fellow lecturer to help those studying their particular fields of expertise. Those who'd rather hone their skills on the battlefield can take on paralogues and auxiliary encounters for rewards. But the chance to wander around the monastery's grounds is hard to resist, with a much broader range of activities on offer – of which, as your lecturer rank increases, you can fit more into your schedule. Seeking out one-to-one tuition from your fellow professors lets you hone your own abilities. Fishing and cultivating crops nets you ingredients for recipes that can boost your party's stats for the rest of the month. Ask two students to join you for lunch and you'll strengthen your bond with them and with one another – assuming you pick a meal they both enjoy. And with full stomachs, they'll show up for lectures all the more eager to learn.

In other words, while there's a lot of downtime, it has a purpose. Some of it can feel like busywork, whether it's choir practice, fighting tournaments, or playing agony aunt. But through all of this, even something as

**Developer** Intelligent Systems, Koei Tecmo Games  
**Publisher** Nintendo  
**Format** Switch  
**Release** Out now

Put in the hard yards and you give your charges a better chance of avoiding a tragic epilogue



## HOUSE II: THE SECOND STORY

The reported 80-hour campaign duration feels generous; we took our time and finished in under 50. On subsequent runs you can hurry things along: restoring saint statues in the cathedral results in permanent boosts that carry over into NG+, while any spare renown can be spent boosting everything from your lecturer level to individual pupils' skill ranks. You can rebuild relationships with your previous students at an earlier stage, too, making it easier to tempt them to switch sides. You'll also have accrued more uses of the Divine Pulse, a limited-use ability that stores every action in a battle and lets you rewind to that one fatal misjudgement or unlucky dice roll. It's further encouragement to ignore the Casual difficulty setting, where fallen units automatically revive after battle.

simple as picking up lost items and working out to whom they belong, *Three Houses* encourages you to take an interest in your students. The more time you spend getting to know their predilections, the more likely you are to develop their skills – whether you lean into their innate strengths or encourage them to pursue latent talents – to your advantage when it's time to go to war. It's min-maxing with a more attractive face, essentially, and with such a range of potential approaches you can focus on the activities you find most enjoyable. Not that you're forced to invest in any of this; an 'auto-instruct' option picks out the most motivated students to follow their pre-allocated goals, while ultimately, you can still only level up by fighting. But put in the hard yards and you give your charges a better chance of avoiding a tragic epilogue during the end credits.

**With battles always** falling on the final week of the month (your opponents are unusually considerate of your schedule) the build-up turns each one into a real event, not least since *Three Houses'* tactical combat has benefitted from intelligent upgrades of its own. Though you'll find familiar scenarios playing out – you'll still want to put mages, rather than archers, against heavily armoured units – the traditional weapon triangle is absent, placing greater emphasis on the combat arts your students unlock as they rank up. This couples brilliantly with the return of *Shadows Of Valentia's* weapon durability: more powerful attacks will dull the edge of a sword or axe quicker, forcing you to visit the blacksmith between battles. But repairing the rarest and best weapons requires scarce ores, preventing you from relying on them too often. In a pinch, you'll need to weigh up the risk of breaking that crit-boosting rapier, or taking a hit from the beast with three health bars that has turned its attention to your wounded pegasus knight. Meanwhile, recruitable battalions (these, too, have limited endurance) offer extra support with special moves that often inflict status effects, freezing enemies to the spot or preventing them from retaliating – while contributing to a much grander sense of scale.

There's more; perhaps too much in places. Certainly, *Three Houses'* interface lacks the elegant immediacy of the 3DS entries – if there's a way to optimise loadouts we haven't found it – while its text is so ludicrously small in handheld mode that the first tear we shed is from squinting at the screen. Nonetheless, we grow as attached to these characters as anyone in *Awakening*, in a story that matches the scope of *Fates* without forcing you to pay three times for the privilege. For the teachers among **Edge's** readership, the thought of spending time tweaking lesson plans might make it too much of a busman's holiday. Everyone else should clear their schedule; as Bernadetta's heartwarming lethality proves, the payoff is well worth the investment.



**RIGHT** Battalions certainly don't unbalance the game – many don't do much more damage than a regular attack, and you won't get a follow-up when your unit outspeeds an opponent. That said, the Stride skill, which can significantly boost movement range for multiple units on a single turn, is a potential game-changer.

**BELOW** There's something heartwarming about your students becoming your peers after the five-year time skip. They also present more opportunities for advanced drills, letting you develop more of your own skills during rest days.

**MAIN** The battlefield isn't as immediately readable as the top-down perspective of the 3DS games, but the flexible camera lets you get a clearer view easily enough



**ABOVE** It looks better in handheld mode where the rough edges of the environments are less noticeable. The trade-off is the odd performance hit during battle animations, which doesn't appear when docked







We miss the sprites representing units, though protagonist Byleth gets their own, which skips across the calendar

## Post Script

Why *Three Houses*' five-year gap is its smartest storytelling decision (contains spoilers)

That *Three Houses* features a time skip, marking a clear point of divergence at the campaign's halfway mark, is something of an open secret – but we'll skip over the precise details all the same. Either way, it solves the game's biggest potential problem: support conversations won't progress beyond B-rank until the second half of the game, which makes the notion of shacking up with your former students a good deal less troublesome. Then again, there's more of a focus on friendship and camaraderie than romance – in the first half, at least. You can ship your favourite couples, but you'll have to wait a while.

But its impact stretches far beyond that. Previous *Fire Emblems* have toyed with time, as a way of letting children fight alongside their parents. But these characters felt like little more than a vector through which to reward the player's matchmaking efforts. The five-year gap in *Three Houses*, on the other hand, carries a greater emotional weight, reflected in the impact on its characters.

One of which is Garreg Mach Monastery itself. Three houses don't necessarily make a home, but it's a place you get to know pretty well over the course of the first 20 hours. And then, suddenly, it changes. Beyond the huge pile of rubble and the cracked pillars in the

cathedral area, there's not a whole lot of visible difference in the structure itself; the sky shifting from a vibrant blue to a sickly yellow-grey colour is a more immediately noticeable effect. But explore further, and the sense of loss and absence is palpable. Gone is the bustle of five years earlier. The home rooms of your rivals are conspicuously empty, while you can almost hear the wind whistling around the corridor where all the second-floor dormitories sit unoccupied. Your classroom, meanwhile, has been transformed into something more like a war room: the rows of desks have been arranged in a rectangle, around which your friends and allies solemnly sit. With the first half giving you so much input into both the school curriculum and your own schedule, here is a sobering reminder that there are some things you can't control.

Another comes when you meet up with your former pupils. Here, you can see both how they've been shaped by your teaching and how they've forged their own path independently since. A contrived but stirring reunion scene in the Blue Lions' path, for example, gives you the opportunity to chat to other units on the battlefield (hardly a new thing for *Fire Emblem*, but less common here) as your former pupils arrive one by one. Some

now belong to different character classes, while others have developed new skills in the intervening period. All of them have new looks and hairstyles. They're still youthful, but have visibly matured; emotionally, too, as you'll discover when you engage them in conversation away from the front line.

But you'll see the difference in action as well – and if ever there was an excuse to leave those battle animations on, here it is. Take Dimitri's first battle following the skip: the Blue Lions' leader was once neat and precise in his movements. Now, there's a newfound callousness evident in the ferocity of his attacks. There's still a certain degree of style in the way he pokes his spear into the ground to vault over a tomahawk – accompanied by a contemptuous "Too slow!" – but even if you skipped the dialogue exchanges it would be clear he's a changed man.

Whether their experiences have made them more confident combatants, or, in Dimitri's case, a vengeance-fuelled shell of a man, it's affecting stuff – all the more so for having given us the chance to see the people they were, before asking us to get to know the people they've become. It may be the year of the videogame time loop, but *Three Houses* makes a persuasive case for more developers to consider the time gap instead. ■



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# Dragon Quest Builders 2

Everyone needs a pat on the back now and again — an acknowledgement of one's efforts. In *Dragon Quest Builders 2*, however, gratitude literally pours out of the people you're helping in the form of small, collectable hearts. You then have the joy of running around to gather them up — or, perhaps, striking the town bell and watching them all zoom towards you in one go. If there's a better visual indicator in videogames of the satisfaction of a job well done, we can't name it.

Indeed, almost everything in this sandbox is designed to please. The way its JRPG structure guides and encourages gentle creativity is a holdover from the first game: as much as this might look like *Minecraft* with a little Square Enix magic sprinkled on top, this is really a *Dragon Quest* game with crafting and building attached. As such, it's almost painfully linear, and, like its many siblings, has trouble knowing when to shut up.

Fortunately, the story and its characters are ineffably charming from the get-go, which makes it easy to forgive. Captured aboard a boat by followers of the creation-hating, destruction-loving Children Of Hargon cult, you're soon wrecked and washed ashore the Isle Of Awakening, a large island that becomes your base of operations and home to the materials and people you collect as you explore the nearby landmasses. 'Explore' is perhaps a slightly generous word: progression is straightforward, with each island unlocked one after the other. Objective markers on your minimap lead you by the nose — our early attempts to discover new areas by ourselves are thwarted by conveniently sleeping NPCs.

But once you accept this and go with the flow, there's a hypnotic quality to how simple yet rewarding *Dragon Quest Builders 2* becomes. The main cycle goes thusly: chat to an NPC in need, who will then ask you for a favour in one of several brilliantly localised cants; head off to gather materials, levelling up by smacking monsters along the way with weapons you've crafted; create the needed item and use it where instructed, or build the requested structure according to a vague set of instructions or a block-by-block blueprint.

It sounds formulaic, but feels anything but: the variety of the tasks and sparkling (if often overlong) writing keep each assignment fun. We find ourselves digging out all sorts of vegetable patches in Furrowfield, for instance — cabbages and wheat are simply planted in tilled soil, but tomato fields and sugar-cane plantations are more complex — and one early mission that has us building a toilet for a faintly distraught villager is as hilarious as it is heartwarming. As soon as we finish the humble structure, the entire population of the town rushes over to form an orderly queue, pumping their fists, jumping for joy and fairly *spewing* hearts. We have honestly never felt more accidentally heroic in our lives.

We're more empowered than in the first game, too. A host of small but significant improvements help ensure

**Developer** Square Enix, Omega Force  
**Publisher** Square Enix, Nintendo  
**Format** PS4, Switch (tested)  
**Release** Out now

When you're in the groove, all of its pieces work together to form one of the most congenial feedback loops in videogames



## NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Online-only multiplayer is a new feature in *Dragon Quest Builders 2*, allowing you to invite a friend over to your Isle Of Awakening to help build your base. The multiplayer portal unlocks after you complete all the missions on the first island, Furrowfield, so anyone hoping to jump into co-op immediately or play the campaign together will be disappointed — but by that time, you'll at least have a decent number of building recipes. There are a range of helpful options for multiplayer, too: if you don't trust your buddy not to blow up all your hard work, you can toggle things like explosives completely off.

that — despite an inflated runtime — our play sessions are largely irritation-free, and tend to creep into the wee hours. A sprinting function (balanced by a stamina meter) allows us to dash across the larger islands, and the ability to fast-travel to various unlocked points instead of having to rely on a craftable, consumable item to get home is a godsend. Our weapons, armour and building hammer don't wear down with use, and combat is slightly more fluid (although still very basic, with no combo system and not even a dodge to its name) as well as being shared among your party of AI characters.

It's hardly engaging to batter at a Badboon with no strategy other than an upgraded weapon, but combat as a means of grinding XP fits better into *Builders 2*'s core loop. Each time you level up, you receive new crafting recipes; earning more gratitude hearts from villagers, meanwhile, unlocks new room recipes, which you use at the Isle Of Awakening to create increasingly fancy structures that, in turn, produce more gratitude.

Ultimately, it's the blend of neatly interlocking systems and winning personality that makes *Dragon Quest Builders 2* feel reactive, and makes it so easy to sink hours into its enthusiastic little checklists. Even mundane tasks are greeted with infectious fanfare — and thanks to an element of automation, optimising each town so that farming, mining and building happen in the background becomes another delight. Townspeople take over the busywork, while we're preoccupied with completing tasks on the randomly generated Explorer's Shores in order to win a lifetime supply of certain materials. When you're in the groove, *Builders 2* is symphonic, its pieces working together to form one of the most congenial feedback loops in games — and propelling you through a thoughtful story about the human need for community and creation.

It doesn't half drag its feet, though. This might be a classic sequel — bigger, longer, more stuff to do — but the pacing issues mean some missions start to feel repetitive, as we trudge through them waiting to get back to the Isle Of Awakening with all our new toys. It's worse when the occasional mission is actively hostile: all the comedy accents can't save a leering plotline about a bar dancer and a bunny suit from falling on the wrong side of the cheeky/gross divide, while an extended prison escape sequence which robs us of all our abilities nearly puts us off returning entirely.

In these moments, *Builders 2* briefly loses sight of what usually makes it such a joy: its willingness to make your life easier, and its happiness at being able to do so. *Dragon Quest Builders 2* is the essence of the classic JRPG distilled into an unlikely form. It's a game that trades on the pleasure of helping people out, and a spirited sequel that practises what it preaches. To Square Enix and Omega Force, then, a pat on the back from us. Job well done.





**ABOVE** You can switch to firstperson mode at any time by clicking in the right stick. We find it far easier to build this way – although from this angle combat somehow manages to feel even clunkier



**TOP** The Windbraker lets you glide across wide open spaces, recalling *Breath Of The Wild's* paraglider. The mini medal-dispensing puzzle shrines, meanwhile, feel like less inventive Korok seed challenges.

**MAIN** You can recruit NPCs from other islands to join you on the Isle Of Awakening. Britney, of whom we become strangely fond, is a fierce warrior who speaks like she's spent too much time on Tumblr.

**LEFT** The first game had you start from scratch after completing each chapter: fortunately, the sequel lets you keep everything you've gathered and crafted from each island, and the towns remain in place too, carrying on their daily business while you're away



# Sky: Children Of The Light

Only a tiny percentage of iOS games have a dedicated screenshot button. It's hard to imagine any of them — even *Monument Valley's* — being used as frequently as *Sky's*. You might think it's hard to inspire wonder on a screen you can hold in your hand, yet Thatgamecompany's latest manages it. You'll find yourself gazing at a distant tower, its minarets poking above glowing clouds; later you'll ride a shimmering manta ray inside a planetarium blanketed in stars. By the end, you'll probably have an email from Apple inviting you to increase your iCloud storage.

Yet stills can't capture a game that draws so much power from the way it moves and feels. A single onscreen button — part of a minimalist interface that's almost invisible when you're in motion — starts it all off. You'll tap it to jump, or hold it to lift off and within moments you're flying, carving contrails through the blue, your cape (like *Journey's* scarf, the source of your power) billowing and fluttering as you swoop down towards those cottony clouds that refill your light when you get close. It's almost a disappointment when it's time to land, though not during an extended downhill slide — a race when others are around — which is surely the most irresistible set-piece of its kind since *Mario 64*.

Few thirdperson mobile games have made the fundamental business of getting around feel so intuitive, though there are occasionally awkward moments that can only be partly attributed to your avatar's earthly clumsiness. Despite a small degree of automation in a standard hop that makes climbing ladders relatively straightforward, there are a few platforming sequences where you'll wish for a controller. These rare moments do, however, serve as an incentive to glide rather than walk where possible; all the more encouragement to locate the winged light that strengthens your cape so you can stay airborne for longer.

**You'll need help** to find it all, and so at times you'll seek out other players. Not that you'll need to look very far: you'll see them gadding about in each of *Sky's* six main areas, with some instinctively gravitating toward others. That's particularly true when you call out or gesture for someone to follow you; your vocabulary expands as you discover more celestial bodies, humanoid manifestations of the stars, scattered throughout these realms. Curiosity is often enough to reach them alone, while others are beyond gates that require you to have obtained a given number of constellations before they'll let you through. None of these really qualify as puzzles, with the rest merely demanding the presence of another player (or several) to complete — even if marshalling a group of eight to simultaneously ignite a mechanism to carry you all to a secret area can take a bit of doing.

That's no real criticism, since the aim is clearly to provide the kind of connections that naturally occurred

**Developer/publisher**  
Thatgamecompany  
**Format** Android, iOS (tested), PC  
**Release** Out now (iOS), TBA (Android, PC)

Within moments you're flying, carving contrails through the blue, your cape billowing and fluttering as you swoop down



## FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

During the beta, you had a friend shrine rather than a list. Now it's a constellation. You can proffer a candle to any player you encounter; if they accept, you'll be prompted to give them a nickname. From then on, they'll appear in the night sky of your hub. If they're not online, their avatar will beam down, letting you gift them a small amount of light once a day. When they are, you can tap a button and you'll be spirited to their side with impressive haste — though there are certain places you won't be able to join them. To play locally with real-life friends, you'll need to have them scan a QR code; this can also be sent in a message, or even posted to Twitter.

in *Journey*, and to make them happen more often. It works. On a grassy prairie, we witness a new player forlornly looking up at a high platform; with our extra cape power, we help them reach it and they call out repeatedly by way of thanks. Later, we join hands with a seemingly rudderless explorer, and they refuse to let go, staying with us even after we whiff the same jump twice. At its best, *Sky's* world design encourages organic teamwork. The disempowerment that comes from losing light stings all the more when being at full strength feels so freeing. And so, when trotting through a forest, your light steadily extinguishing, you'll make a beeline for others, huddling together around your candles' flames. Yet the strength-in-numbers approach doesn't always work: on our second playthrough, the first area's biggest task is over within three seconds of our arrival. That hardly bothers us, but we can't help but feel for any newcomers who'll watch the subsequent cutscene with bemusement, having done nothing to trigger it.

Nor is it always easy to differentiate beginners from those who've visited every corner of *Sky's* celestial theme park. The cosmetic rewards that distinguish more experienced players are hard-earned, with many requiring multiple playthroughs. With three candles making a heart, and five hearts unlocking, say, an Afro wig, that's an awful lot of light to produce. No matter how much Vincent Diamante's score soars toward the heavens, it's harder to appreciate the splendour of its setting when you're thinking about where best to farm candles. Though far less aggressively monetised than most F2P games, there's no denying it's quicker to pay to unlock cosmetic items. And the presence of a visiting god within the main hub is a reminder that those who haven't shelled out for a season pass are missing out.

Some of this can be attributed to Thatgamecompany stepping outside its comfort zone, while other minor issues will surely be patched in time. One unlockable spell surrounds you with a blinding glow for 15 in-game minutes, letting you become a beacon to give others a bearing in gloomier areas — but it's so dazzling that it becomes harder to find your own way. And during *Sky's* confusing endgame, the minor shortcomings of the controls become major ones. There's plenty to lose here, and not an awful lot to gain, making for an NG+ without much of a plus. As in *Nier: Automata*, it involves a sacrifice of sorts, but while there you gave up something precious knowing exactly how it would help others, the benefit for your fellow player here is harder to gauge.

Even so, you return armed with something important. In *Sky*, knowledge can be a powerful thing, an asset that makes you more useful to those who seem lost, as you lead them toward the light. The world may no longer be as spectacular on your second, third or eighth time around, but the joy in the connections you make with your fellow sky children is a constant.





**ABOVE** Finding these spirits is often a matter of simply following a trail of spectral figures to their destination. Each one gives you a new emote; these can be levelled up with candles for more flamboyant expressions



**MAIN** Sky looks beautiful even if you've enabled its energy-saving lo-res option. The default setting caps the framerate at 30, as does a further hi-def mode; we mostly played it on the high-performance option that ups the framerate to 60, though either of the top two settings will quickly turn your iPhone into a hand warmer.

**ABOVE** Some secret areas are surprisingly well-hidden; as a rule it pays to find a high perch and look around carefully for a telltale ring of light or swarm of butterflies.

**LEFT** Light sources are often spread far apart, encouraging you to team up so you can restore one another's wing power to reach higher ground. In the Vault here, you'll want to make sure you've got three other players in tow



# Nowhere Prophet

The secret of a good Roguelike, or any run-based game, is that reaching game over – taking a killing blow, losing your final unit or plunging the world into darkness – can actually be a highlight. It's a chance to reflect on what you did wrong and hash out plans that will surely guarantee victory next time. The tragedy of *Nowhere Prophet*, a card game essentially locked into 'ironman' mode, is that it makes losing no fun at all.

Which is a shame, because there's a lot to like here. You lead a caravan of survivors across Soma, a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Yes, another one – but where *Nowhere Prophet* differs is that, alongside all the usual Mad Maxisms, it draws inspiration from the Indian subcontinent. The dusty landscapes are splattered with oranges and pinks evoking the coloured powders thrown during the Hindu festival of Holi, and its character designs find an interesting midpoint between Indian history and cyberpunk future.

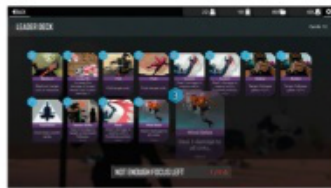
It's not short of mechanical ideas, either, even if they're not all strictly new. *Nowhere Prophet* grabs concepts from other games with the eagerness of Soma's scavengers. Like *Slay The Spire*, this is a singleplayer deckbuilding game where you navigate a map of branching paths, beating bosses to progress to the next screen, with the added complication of resources to manage – primarily food and hope, burned like fuel as you travel across the wasteland. This is the first clue that *Nowhere Prophet*'s structure is borrowed from an earlier source: *FTL*. The next is the proliferation of text events, blocks of story with multiple-choice outcomes that trigger whenever you reach a new point on the map, and occasionally while travelling between them. These are at least as common as card battles – you're likely to encounter in excess of 50 text events in a single playthrough. It doesn't take long for repetition to set in, and we find ourselves skimming the flavour text, clicking an option without much care for the consequences.

The battles themselves are much more successful, sticking close to the formula laid out by *Hearthstone*, with an added spatial element that recalls *Gwent*. You play units in rows and columns – only those closest to the enemy can attack, or be attacked – and use them to either chip away at your opponent's battle line or go straight for their leader. In practice, you're almost always best doing the latter.

The card game is quietly asymmetrical. While both sides are playing the same game, their objectives are different because of the context each match is played within. Computer-controlled opponents are trying to reduce your leader to zero health. You're trying to do the same to them while minimising losses, with an eye to future battles, because your leader's health is persistent, as is damage to your troops. Any time a card-summoned character gets knocked out of the game, they take a wound. If it happens again, you lose that card forever.

**Developer** Sharkbomb Studios  
**Publisher** No More Robots  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now

The best plan, in almost all cases, is to throw everything at the leader, trying to knock them out as quickly as possible



## PACK LEADER

*Nowhere Prophet*'s permadeath discourages careful deckbuilding – but, in truth, this is only half the story, because it's not just one deck you're playing with. As well as the Convoy, your hand of units, there's the Leader deck, filled with one-time powers that work more like *Slay The Spire*'s Skill cards. This is where the game's most interesting card design resides, allowing you to damage your troops to boost their attack values, or wipe out every unit below a certain level – on both sides of the battlefield. Exempt from permadeath, the Leader deck is your opportunity for finesse. As your character levels up, you can choose one of three cards to add and, vitally, pick one card from your current deck to bin. Ah, there's that engine-building thrill we missed.

It's an interesting twist on the standard deckbuilder: use your favourite cards too much and you risk losing them. But in practice, it makes for a strange fit. Battles are too frequent to spend the pre-game fussing over vulnerable units, the way you would in a game like *XCOM*, and – in spite of the option to rename them – it's much harder to form a connection with a virtual square of card. Worse, the inclusion of permadeath discourages chasing synergies and honing the exact right balance of cards – the things that make it so compelling to construct your own deck – because you never know when you'll lose the one card that ties it all together.

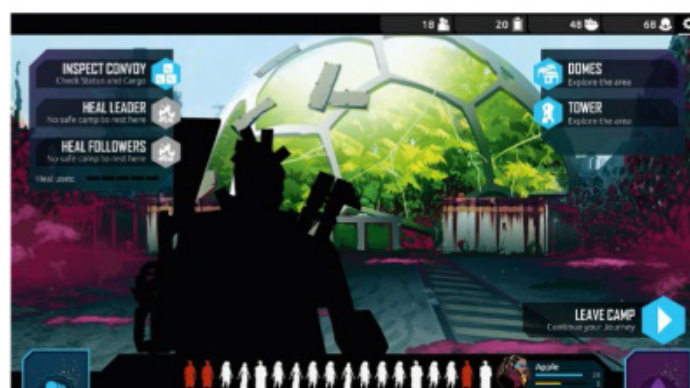
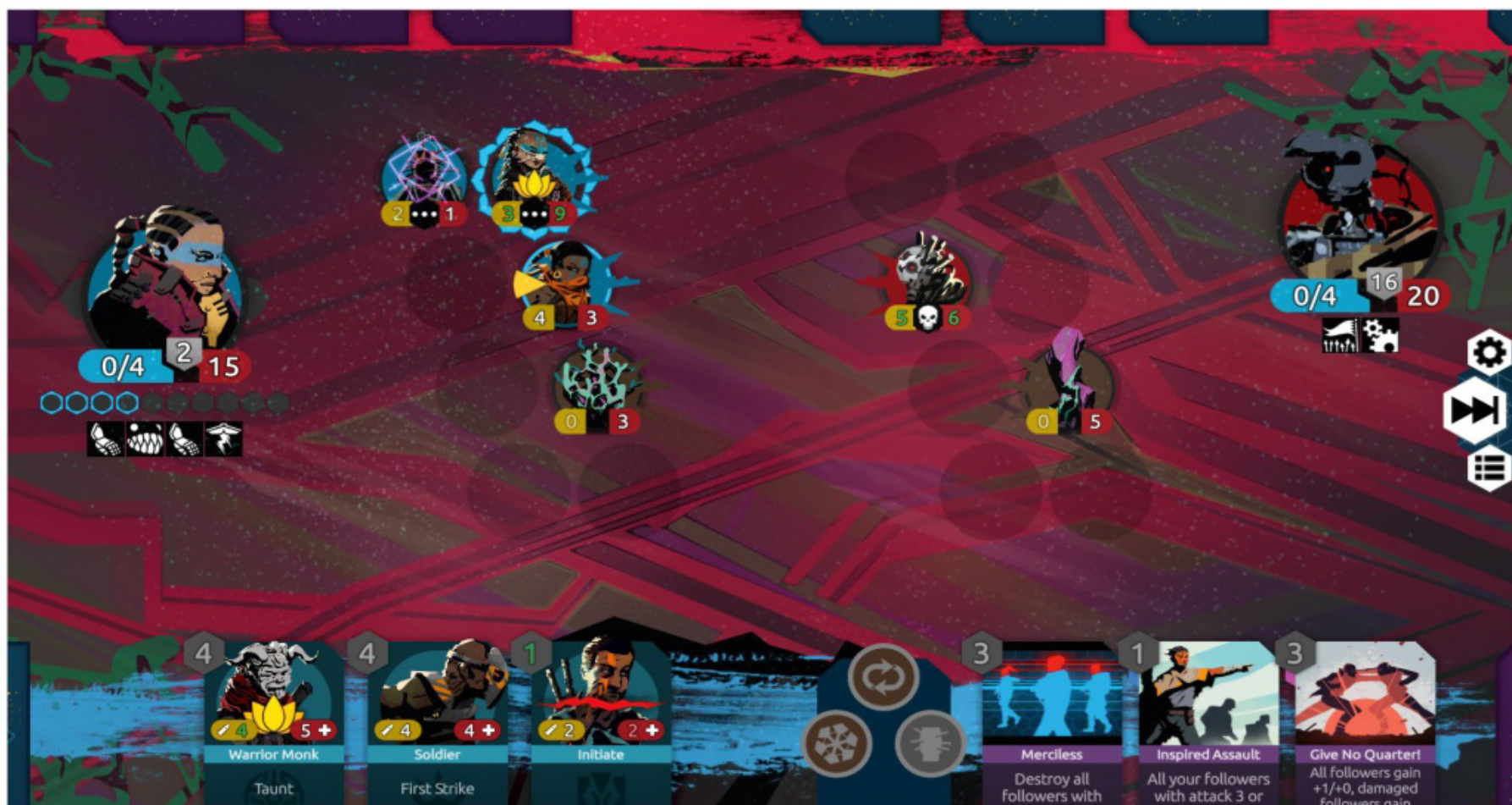
So when you're at the virtual table, attacking other units feels wasteful, because it damages your cards. Go for your opponent directly, though, and you don't have to suffer any counterattack. The best plan, in almost all cases, is to throw everything you've got at the leader, trying to knock them out as quickly as possible so you can escape with minimal losses. There is a mechanical counter to this: Taunt, which – as in *Hearthstone* – means that unit must be destroyed before attacks can be pointed elsewhere. In our experience, this one keyword ends up defining most of *Nowhere Prophet*'s battles. Any match where the opponent fails to get a Taunt to the table is over in a few rounds. Only when an enemy Taunt is played do you have to engage in the board state.

Groanworthy stuff, yes, but it does reveal the abundance of ideas buried in *Nowhere Prophet*'s card game. The multi-lane positioning alone would be enough to make it stand out. The grids can vary in size, giving you a frontline that's between three and five spaces wide, and are randomly scattered with obstacles. Together, these factors can hugely impact the feel of a battle. A three-by-three grid with rubble blocking one of the lanes can be enough to induce claustrophobia, and encourages you to play with the push and pull mechanics, which recall *Into The Breach*.

The game's structure, though, means that these kinds of intricacies are often ignored, in favour of just playing on autopilot. Your eye skims over a text event; your brain seeks the quickest route to end combat, because there are always 50 more piling up behind. Runs take multiple hours to complete, and while there are new decks to be unlocked, they're accessed by hitting fixed milestones, meaning there's no consolation prize for any run that fails to surpass your personal best.

Defeat in *Nowhere Prophet* can be creeping, as your resources drain away, or sudden, as you fall victim to an unexpected combination of cards. Either way, it feels like playing against an opponent who overturns the table when they win, leaving you to gather up the spilled cards. It'll be another couple of hours before you have a deck that feels unique, before you escape the mire of enemies and text events you've seen a dozen times. It's enough to make you a sore loser.





**ABOVE** Milestones often have markets for goods or new recruits, and can be explored to access yet more text events – each location you come to is basically a miniature choose-your-own-adventure book

**MAIN** Any unit which lands the killing blow on a leader becomes Blessed (marked with the gold lotus-flower icon), boosting their attack and protecting them from one wound. It's another attempt to create a connection with your individual cards.

**ABOVE** Special locations are marked on the map. Tough enemy encampments are red, loot stashes are green and milestone locations are a sort of muddy brown.

**RIGHT** Each unlockable leader and convoy deck has its own clear personality. The Nomads are all about flooding the battlefield with cheap units, while Echo's cards put a heavier focus on positioning





# Dr Mario World

The seemingly infinite world map, the power-ups, the twin currencies and match-three gameplay: there's no mistaking it. Here is proof, if you still needed it, that we are living in the darkest timeline. The year is 2019, and Nintendo has cloned *Candy Crush Saga*.

As with *Candy Crush*, there's the seed of a decent game in here. The traditional *Dr Mario* pattern of play has been inverted, and subverted. Rather than match pellets that fall from the top of the screen, you swipe them up from the bottom with your thumb. There's no time pressure either, at least on normal stages – incoming pellets are stored at the bottom of the screen, allowing you time to plan your move. And while things escalate in the *Candy Crush* style – viruses that must be matched twice, then three times before they disappear, and so on – there are some nice touches as you progress. Realising that you're able to steer loose half-pills, and they can be pushed through seemingly impassable blocks, are pleasant eureka moments.

Sadly, as with *Candy Crush*, there are problems everywhere around them. Hearts are the game's energy system, limiting how much you can play unless you either pay or beg Facebook friends for a re-up. You'll earn one each time you clear a stage for the first time,

In among the locked viruses (below centre) is a variant that teleports to a random spot on screen when you match it; you'll need to do so three times in total. It's a strong contender for the most annoying virus in the game

**Developer** Nintendo, Line, NHN  
**Publisher** Nintendo  
**Format** Android, iOS (tested)  
**Release** Out now



## DRUG WARS

The leisurely pace of the campaign ratchets up in Versus mode, where you'll face off against randomly matched foes or Facebook friends. As is tradition for puzzle games, the aim is to fill your opponent's playfield with trash generated from your own, speedier clears – though there's a twist, since you choose when to deploy your attack using a skill powered by a refillable meter. RNG is always a concern in multiplayer puzzling, and it's especially the case here, given that both parties are using characters they've rolled – and possibly levelled – from a monetised gacha system.

but difficulty spikes and timed challenges are designed to clean you out. A half-hour recharge time, intended to make you get your wallet out, instead pushes you away.

Then there are diamonds, the premium currency used for heart refills, power-up purchases and recruiting staff through the game's gacha system. You pick one doctor, who has a unique skill with a charge time proportionate to its power – Bowser's, which clears two random rows, takes an age to come up, but Toad's destruction of ten random spaces is frequently available. Assistants offer tiny buffs, or small chances of bigger ones: the goomba raises your score by a percentage point, though that, and the doctors' cooldowns, can be improved by levelling them up with duplicate rolls.

There's a troubling whiff of pay-to-win – there's no other way to power up your team – but in fairness the game is built on it, forever offering brute-force solutions in exchange for a few minutes alone with your credit card. But nothing is worth spending money on. Nice as it is to see a *Mario* favourite in a lab coat, the random nature of skills mean they're no more likely to cure you than they are to finish you off. Assistant buffs are either similarly random or so slender as to not be noticeable. Even rolling for new characters fails to set the pulse racing. That's a damning failure for a gacha game, though it's just one of many afflictions blighting Nintendo's most boring smartphone outing so far.

4





# Stranger Things 3: The Game

You'd think a retro-styled action-adventure would be an ideal fit for The Duffer Brothers' nostalgia-fuelled Netflix hit. Alas, the show's Amblin-esque blend of coming-of-age drama, sci-fi and schlocky horror is in scant evidence in this frankly tedious adaptation. It's faithful to its source in a superficial sense, following the plot of the third series so closely that for those who've seen it, the whole thing functions as an incredibly long-winded recap. And for those who haven't, it's little more than an extended spoiler, not least in the sense that anyone with the patience to reach the end is sure to wonder what all the fuss was about.

Given it's set in 1985, it doesn't work as an authentic throwback either. A true homage to the time would not look like a 16bit home console game, much less feature the kind of contemporary crafting mechanics that add nothing more than extra busywork to already protracted fetch quests. Its rudimentary combat feels a little more era-appropriate: each character, of the dozen you'll gradually accrue, has a normal attack and a special bound to an energy meter that's topped up by drinking Coke. There's a block that's designed to let you absorb a blow and respond with a more powerful counter, but since you're rarely

You can equip up to five craftable trinkets. Some boost single characters, while others benefit the whole party. Earning the ingredients you need – or the cash to buy them – essentially requires you to smash everything in sight

**Developer/publisher** BonusXP  
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now



## TOO TRUE

In some respects, the game's faithfulness to the television series can be lauded – the isometric recreations of Hawkins' various locations, from the Starcourt Mall to Hopper's cabin, certainly look the part. In sticking so closely to the script, meanwhile, it hits upon a truth about the show: that much of its appeal comes down to the chemistry between its young cast, and the quality of their performances. And another: that the Duffers gave poor Will Byers short shrift this season.

up against a single opponent, it's borderline useless. Far better to chip away from distance with Lucas's slingshot, or use the range of Dustin's hairspray against the gangs of Russians, thugs and Russian thugs that pad out the set-pieces lifted from the show. Whether you've got a co-op partner or not, you'll explore as a pair: it's worth roping in a friend, if only to lighten the load of individually moving two characters onto pressure plates to open a door, an example of the kind of creativity you can expect to find in the puzzles.

The ability to switch in any character allows BonusXP to throw in some skill-gated exploration, which amounts to nothing more than tapping buttons to use Joyce's bolt cutters or Dustin's hacking skills, while making a nonsense of the plot. And while there's amusement in watching, say, Steve clear a room with his infinite supply of ice cream cones, it's preposterous that these do more damage than Eleven's psychic attacks (her space-clearing 'nuke' attack costs two energy points, the only real sign of her formidable power). Meanwhile, the horror elements simply don't register. You'll be more irritated than scared by the tiny, fleshy blobs that take an inordinate number of hits to destroy, while one potentially tense pursuit is over in seconds: a rare sequence that doesn't drag its feet. Unlike the corny-cute singalong of the finale, this isn't a Neverending Story, but at times it feels like one.

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# Fantasy Strike

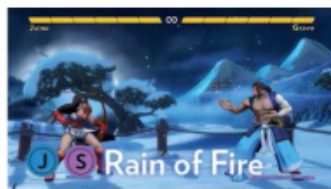
You never get a second chance to make a first impression, and *Fantasy Strike*'s is woeful. It's been designed to demystify a famously complex genre while retaining the essence of what makes fighting games so thrilling. The introductory tutorial, however, makes a complete hash of it. "Attack the sparring partners with A," we're told. So, naturally, we press the A button, and the tutorial fails to advance. A quick look at the onscreen key tells us that our A attack is actually on the Y button, B is X, C is A and J is B.

To David Sirlin – the designer behind the remade, rebalanced version of *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, and a sequel to chess – this all doubtless makes perfect sense. So too must the art style, which if we were feeling generous we'd call "distinct" but are more inclined to deem "belligerently ugly". Likewise, he seems content to ignore how characters from his card-based fighting game Yomi being placed into a button-based one has only served to emphasise how beholden they are to Capcom's. Grave is a less charismatic Ryu with a sword, while Setsuki is Ibuki if her hairdresser found out she'd been sleeping with her husband.

It would be tempting to write it off immediately as yet another misguided attempt at an accessible fighting

While the story mode is as barebones as *Street Fighter V*'s launch effort, it's easier to forgive – especially as other modes, such as Arcade, Survival and the merrily ridiculous powerup-focused Boss Rush, offer alternatives

**Developer/publisher** Sirlin Games  
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch (tested)  
**Release** Out now



## HANDS-OFF APPROACH

Short, narrated video tutorials offer a simple breakdown of each character's playstyle and their capabilities in specific situations. Geiger's shows how his Time Spiral projectile can be used to zone, or followed in to apply pressure; Valerie's suggests varying her automatic cross-up to unsettle opponents, and explains why it's preferable to save meter for her air super rather than the ground version. We're surprised by how effective this approach is: we're comfortable with characters in minutes, no doubt because of *Fantasy Strike*'s simplicity – perhaps it's also because our hands are free to take notes.

game. But *Fantasy Strike* soon makes clear that it's much more. At times, it's positively electric stuff. Normal, special and super attacks are usually done via a single button press; at a push, they may also require a directional input. There's no crouch or dash to speak of, and we don't miss either. Move lists and combos are short, meaning it's easy to quickly get a handle on a character – and *Fantasy Strike* does, dare we say it, a genre-leading job of explaining their options (see Hands-off approach). Visual effects for frame advantage tell you how safe or unsafe the move you've just used is. Then there's the Yomi counter, which forces you to let go of the controls completely to tech normal throws. For genre diehards, it's initially confusing, but the benefit is soon clear: it places the emphasis on reading your opponent, instead of merely reacting to them.

It's a game that lets you focus on swift, informed decision-making rather than execution – we find ourselves mentally exhausted after playing for long stretches. But it's worth it: we've stopped mashing entirely, trained out of it. It's heartbreaking that this is destined to go the way of *Pocket Rumble* (we're already struggling to find matches online). What we've got here is one of the most thoughtfully constructed fighters we've ever played, but *Fantasy Strike* initially presents as off-puttingly amateurish, and we fear few are likely to give it the second chance it deserves.

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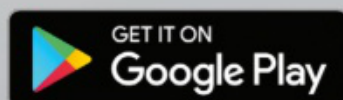






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# Persona 5

How the world's most stylish prisoners stole our hearts

**By JON BAILES**

Developer/publisher Atlus Format PS3, PS4 Release 2016



**T**he city is a usually a cultural symbol of liberal values, a place where anything goes. In *Persona 5*, it's a prison. When your character arrives in Tokyo at the start of the game, the first thing *Persona 5* does is lock the city down, subjecting you to its systems of control and surveillance. There's no escape, no matter where you go. You're a prisoner of fate, of social hierarchy, even of your own mind. Except with *Persona* there's always another hidden dimension. It doesn't want to crush your spirit so much as fire it up until it explodes.

Much of the *Persona* formula is well suited to representing confinement. For one, the quantity of dialogue and exposition means that for the first few hours especially you'll be held captive by the plot. After a tantalising peek at your dynamic alter-ego to come, the main character is thrown into a cell and forced to recall his story from its low-key start. As this out-of-town high-schooler, on probation for a crime he didn't commit, you spend your first days getting dragged between story beats, clicking through dialogue while the game's world and systems are introduced at a glacial pace.

When you finally get to wander, you remain highly regulated. The sprawling city is recreated as a series of discrete spaces with hard borders and a handful of interaction points. The division of time into strictly segmented calendar days determines what you can do and when. Every choice of activity you make is recorded. All your conversations and free-time exploits are numerically systematised to rate your progress with mathematical precision. In this atmosphere of assumed criminality, minor freedoms are a privilege to be earned through meeting targets and deadlines. Even the NPCs police your behaviour, whether it's your distrustful guardian Sojiro checking on your movements or magical talking cat Morgana telling you to go to bed.

Not that even sleep grants respite. In your dreams you find yourself transported to the mysterious Velvet Room, whose appearance supposedly reflects the state of your own heart. And of course it's a prison cell. On the other side of the bars, long-

nosed series regular Igor and his diminutive wardens, Justine and Caroline, demand you fulfil a greater purpose, by achieving some cryptic form of 'rehabilitation'. Whatever's going on, it's another form of monitoring, and you have no say in the matter.

**Feeling oppressed yet?** You should be. Desperate to escape? Hold on to that. Because there's something bubbling under the surface in *Persona 5* – a sense in every constraint that things have to change. The big-city setting, in contrast to *Persona 4*'s rural locale, is already telling. It bursts with the promise of alternative lives, eye-popping sights and endless pleasures. As for the protagonist, what can hold back a curious high school student looking to express himself, forge relationships and discover new experiences, especially a victim of injustice with an urge to strike back and clear his name? There are hints in the narrative, too, from that taste of excitement in the game's opening to the mysteries surrounding the Velvet Room.

More than that, *Persona* games are exemplars of youthful energy, and *Persona 5* positively sparkles with it. It's there in the title sequence, with its impossibly cool graphic design and lyrical command to 'wake up, get up, get out there'. It's in the game's menus, uncompromising blocks of red and black poised at chaotic angles that threaten to break out of the frame. It's in the cheeky sound effects and brash voiceovers, and in the character designs, from your fresh-faced pals to the outlandish personas. And it's in the soundtrack, from its dirty bass lines and funky organ melodies through to its big, show-stopping songs of empowerment.

The secret to success in this series is a style that bleeds out of the screen and becomes infectious. In *Persona 5*, it's a mirage so powerful that it twists old-fashioned turn-based battles into anarchic showdowns peppered with meaty gunshots, played out to a vocal track mocking the audacity of your enemies, and ending with an unfazed victory strut. It's indicative of an aesthetic that works expertly to rub against the repressive narrative and systems, communicating the vibrancy of your characters' hidden selves with confidence.

As the friction builds, it needs an outlet, and it comes in the shape of the ►

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Metaverse, a parallel dimension formed from people’s unconscious desires. It’s here that ordinary routine is suspended, and the protagonist and his friends symbolically tear off their masks to unleash their repressed inner personas and become the Phantom Thieves. It’s also here that the villains of the outside world can be opposed.

After so much restriction, the aim of stealing the hearts of your adversaries to erase their darkest drives and punish their transgressions is massively enticing. It helps that your first target, school PE teacher and ex-Olympian Kamoshida, is particularly nasty. His abuse of volleyball team members, ignored by the adults around him, is so personal, and your position as students so powerless, you can’t help but share the group’s righteous indignation. By the time you get the chance to face his shadow and



fascination with psychoanalysis and the composition of the mind. It asks us whether we’re prisoners to our innermost desires, or whether consciousness grants us agency, no matter how small, to forge alternative paths. It also asks about our social programming, or how determined we are by the fate of our circumstances and cultural norms, and where the limits of our conformity lie.

In the end, the biggest crime of all for

Targeting an enemy’s weakness can lead to a hold-up, where you can negotiate with it to pay you off, or join you as a persona

IT ASKS WHETHER WE’RE PRISONERS TO OUR INNERMOST DESIRES OR WHETHER CONSCIOUSNESS GRANTS US AGENCY

steal his heart, you’re itching to destroy him.

From there, your Phantom Thieves will target elite sinners in the art world, organised crime, business, law and politics. This is a bold move for *Persona*, tackling social issues with a sweeping critique, and bringing a political dimension to its notions of constraint and freedom. In keeping with the teenage cast, there’s a certain naivety to it still, not least in its philosophical idealism. But it’s an inspiring call to action, especially to youth against the ageing established order, and the downtrodden against the elite, which demonstrates that the first step to breaking free from a prison is recognising that you’re in one.

Equally fascinating is how different concepts of incarceration are woven through the game’s structure. All the talk of ‘hearts’, for example, is a return to the series’

*Persona 5* is doing nothing, or tolerating unjust conditions. This reflects in your progress, so the more you act to determine your own fate, the more the game opens up with more places to go, people to see and time to play with. Meanwhile, the characters grow in confidence about their feelings and potential, eventually realising that their path is the only escape from the most stultifying prisons of all – apathy and sin.

Yet in some ways this celebration of self-realisation doesn’t carry through the whole game, and even serves to highlight its weaknesses. Structurally, there’s still a great imbalance between daily life and the game’s dungeons, or ‘palaces’. As the months go by, the real world becomes stuffed with things to do, each one delivered in a fun-sized chunk. In particular, hanging out with ‘confidants’ becomes a priority, given that



The real-world villains are unaware of their monstrous shadow selves and the desires that control them





## SCHOOL'S OUT

While *Persona 5* requires you to attend the elite Shujin Academy, school life is less central to the experience overall. Once you've dealt with Kamoshida, there's rarely much to do there outside of lessons, and focus switches to the wider city. Afterschool clubs are no longer an option, and more of the people you get to know have no connection to the school at all, including some of the Phantom Thieves. It's fitting for a game in which many of the main characters feel a little more grown up and independent, with part-time jobs and social lives that take them out into the world, as well as for some of the bigger, more mature themes it wants to tackle.

Soon you'll be visiting the Velvet Room voluntarily, to register, purchase and fuse new personas



Various activities help level up personal attributes such as proficiency, charm and guts, which you'll need to build close relationships

the game's individual stories are often the most personal. In contrast, a single visit to a palace can take an hour or more, especially as it's more economical to make fewer, longer trips to maximise your time slots.

The palaces are more varied, bespoke locations than in previous games, but working through them is still a trudge. Simple puzzles are introduced that increasingly function merely to pad out your visits, while no amount of presentational flair can keep repeated fights against samey enemies fresh. Given that this is where your team is supposed to be unleashing their repressed selves to become masked crime fighters, the pedestrian pace is incongruous. Deciding where to go after school shouldn't be more exciting than battling supernatural monsters and saving the world.

More alarming is how the game's radical themes jar against its cultural conservatism.

Too many female characters suffer from being written (and drawn) as varying types of dating material, with romantic relationships still ultimately triggered unilaterally by the male protagonist. Courtship remains superficial and calculated, based on selecting the best dialogue and gift options, turning each woman into a puzzle that requires the correct code to unlock. It's worse for gay characters, whose only representation comes in comedy skits featuring a duo of hyper-camp sexual predators. If in *Persona 4*, backwards attitudes in some way reflected the cast's small-town mentality, there's nowhere to hide in the city. Not only has another decade passed; *Persona 5* also explicitly sets out to valorise social change, self-expression and nonconformity, and features a gang whose experiences and goals should make them more switched-on.

There's no doubt that Atlus deployed its established formula smartly in *Persona 5*, taking it to a new level of polish and building a multi-layered story that plays to its strengths. But it's hard to ignore that the formula itself is becoming confining, perhaps weighed down by expectations, not to mention all the associated cartoons, dancing games and merchandise that go with them. That super-hip theme song asks: 'Can we make a difference, if we don't break outta here?' It's a question that Atlus could pose itself going forward. Is it also a prisoner of fate, or does it want to break out and make a difference next time? ■



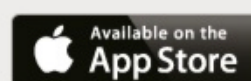


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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



## Apex Legends

**Developer** Respawn Entertainment **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2019

**N**ot even the bravest industry soothsayers came forward to proclaim *Apex Legends* heir to the battle-royale throne before it arrived in February. This is a genre full of unlikely success stories and puzzling flops, and making predictions isn't easy. So when Respawn's free-to-play game brought over 50 million players to Kings Canyon in its first month, the studio was suddenly faced with all the challenges an enormous and unanticipated userbase brings: server instability, cheaters and the question of how to keep players around in the long term.

These are challenges the studio has risen to confidently, calling upon the received wisdom of other stratospheric multiplayer hits such as *Call Of Duty* and *Fortnite* by rolling out free XP weekends and limited-time events in which exclusive items could be secured. June's Legendary Hunt event offered new character and weapon skins in return for completing specific – and very achievable – objectives. These additions don't change the landscape of a game, but they're tried and tested methods of holding an audience.

As for the less glamorous work to minimise instability, after a frustrating spell in March for server crashes the course appears to have been corrected. Regular updates have brought about long lists of quality-of-life tweaks, going as granular as loot placement and the time it takes to display armour in

death chests (prior to the June update, there was a pause before it displayed). A popular exploit that let players bunny-hop while healing has gone the way of the dinosaurs, while obvious cheaters appear rarely.

As *Apex* slips into a now-familiar seasonal release cadence for new content, it marks season two with an in-game event in which a Repulsor tower breaks and the mysterious leviathans previously spotted on the map's edge now wander wild. These monsters stamp the ground at random intervals downing players beneath, while new dragon-like 'flyers' prowl the skies, picking up death boxes and dog tags until they're shot. And it's all new character Wattson's fault, apparently. Her defensive abilities add a new wrinkle to the meta, nullifying proximity attacks and grenades. What's most striking is that Respawn clearly had a plan from day one. Those Leviathans were present on launch day, and their significance is only now being revealed. What else is laying dormant in Kings Canyon?

Ranked play, introduced in season two, will colour *Apex's* future. Here, as with the rest of the game, it's clear Respawn has surveyed the lay of the land and decided on a kinder tier progression than most offer, rewarding not just wins but high-place finishes and knockdowns. Its fortunes are tied to the battle-royale bubble, but it's taking the most considered approach of its peers towards – excuse us – the long game. ■





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